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

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## **Georgia Baptists oppose homosexuality, while charismatic-worship ban falls short**

COLUMBUS, Ga. (ABP) -- Georgia Baptists approved a constitutional amendment excluding congregations that "endorse" homosexuality, but another vote aimed at churches that practice charismatic worship fell short of a required two-thirds majority.

Meeting Nov. 16-17 in Columbus, messengers to the Georgia Baptist Convention adopted new language excluding as a "cooperating" church any congregation "which knowingly takes, or has taken, any action to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

"The unanimous verdict of Scripture is that the practice of homosexuality is a sin," said Gerald Harris, pastor of Eastside Baptist Church in Marietta, who headed the committee which drew up the amendment. While the Bible condemns homosexual behavior, it also demands compassion for individuals who are gay, he said.

The new amendment "is not an attempt to monitor churches or tell churches what to do," Harris said, "but we do feel we have a responsibility for maintaining the integrity of our convention."

Prior to the change, the state convention's constitution defined friendly cooperation solely in terms of financial support.

Bill Self, pastor of John's Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, spoke in opposition to the change. "I want to ask one simple question," he said. "This year, the homosexuals. Who's next, churches that receive African Americans? Churches that allow women in the ministry?"

Robert White, executive director of the Georgia convention, said if there is a complaint that a church is violating the standard, he will meet with the pastor and the convention will ask the church to come into compliance or leave the denomination.

The ban on affirming homosexuality is similar to language added to the Southern Baptist Convention constitution in 1992 after two Southern Baptist churches in North Carolina made news by holding a ceremony of blessing for a gay couple and licensing an open homosexual as a minister.

Baptist state conventions in North Carolina and Texas have also previously taken action against churches affirming gays.

Officials of the Georgia convention said the new language is not directed at any particular churches but would already be in place as an official standard should the issue come up in the future.

A second proposed part of the amendment would also have excluded churches "which encourage members to speak in tongues or to participate in the practice of 'being slain in the spirit' or to engage in worship practices that are divisive and disruptive." It received 1,190 "yes" votes and 747 "no" votes, about 5 percent short of a two-thirds majority required to amend the constitution.

Speaking for the amendment, executive committee member Mike Everson said the convention needs "clearly defined lines about where we should stand as Baptists."

"There are churches in the state of Georgia that are practicing being 'slain in the spirit,' barking like dogs, roaring like lions," said Everson, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Warner Robins. "They ought not to be doing that and calling themselves Baptists."

But opponents argued that the ban on "divisive" worship practices was too broad. "How can we determine in a specific location, week by week, what might occur, [and] whether a congregation is truly approving or promoting that type of activity?" asked Ron Hinson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Blakely. "I would question whether we have a real capacity to do that."

Both constitutional amendments were proposed by the state convention's executive committee, which approved them overwhelmingly in September.

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-- By ABP staff. Gayle White, Lori Johnston and Johnny Pierce contributed information used in this report.

## **Virginia Baptists celebrate 175 years**

By Robert Dilday

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. (ABP) -- Messengers to this year's Baptist General Association of Virginia marked 175 years of ministry in a quiet meeting that included the election of four officers without opposition and the adoption of a \$15 million budget for 1999.

Meeting at the Pavilion Convention Center in Virginia Beach, the 1,772 messengers recalled the BGAV's organization in 1823, while celebrating its continued involvement in mission and ministry.

Elected by acclamation as president was Gene Watson, a businessman from Farmville, Va., and member of Farmville Baptist Church.

Also elected were David Sapp, pastor of Derbyshire Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., as first vice president; Ellen Gwathmey, minister of visitation and outreach at River Road Baptist Church in Richmond, as second vice president; and Fred Anderson of Richmond, executive director of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society, as clerk.

The 1999 budget of \$15,083,901 -- which goes into effect Dec. 1 -- is slightly less than the current \$15.2 million budget. The reduced figure more accurately reflects the level of funding by the BGAV's 1,470 affiliated congregations, said budget committee chair Ray Spence of Richmond.

As in previous years, the budget offers churches three options for channeling their contributions through the budget. A portion of each option funds ministries in Virginia, while a smaller part is distributed to national and international ministries. Those percentages are unchanged in the 1999 budget.

Seven resolutions were adopted with little discussion. A resolution affirming the sanctity of marriage cited Matthew 2:27,32, defining "the marriage covenant as a lifelong commitment between one man and one woman."

Another resolution noted the 50th anniversary of student missions in Virginia; four recognized retiring members of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board staff; and one expressed appreciation for organizers of the annual meeting.

Two other resolutions submitted early in the meeting were not reported out by the resolutions committee. One addressed the crisis in Central America in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch, which left as many as 11,000 people dead. A resolutions committee spokesperson said structures already were in place for Virginia Baptists to provide assistance in the region.

Another proposed resolution would have affirmed the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement and its recent amendment on family life. Steward McCarter of Suffolk, Va., who presented the resolution, asked messengers to bring it to the floor for consideration but the request failed by wide margin.

Messengers also "commended" to BGAV churches a statement on homosexuality presented by the convention's Christian life committee. The statement affirms "the biblical teaching that homosexual behavior is sinful and unacceptable for Christians." However, it also offers guidelines for expressing "Christ-like compassion for homosexual persons."

"The Bible does not teach that homosexuality is the unpardonable sin. ... It is included by Paul right along with a list of other sins including fornication, adultery, thievery, covetousness, drunkenness, slander and extortion," the report stated, citing I Corinthians 6:9-10.

The report, following a two-year study by the committee, offered the following suggestions for churches in ministering to homosexuals:

- Show compassionate concern without endorsing their homosexuality.
- Seek to change attitudes and actions which do not reflect Christ-like character.
- Provide guidance for understanding how to relate to homosexuals and provide training in relationship skills, evangelistic procedures and nonjudgmental approaches.
- Provide support to families of homosexuals, just as would be provided for any family suffering traumatic experiences, loss or guilt feelings.
- Challenge the idea that the homosexual is a person to be ridiculed.

The report is intended as a resource to local churches and is not an attack on homosexuals, BGAV Executive Director Reginald McDonough said.

"What we are trying to do is clarify that we think a homosexual lifestyle is not in tune with biblical understandings and teachings and violates the guidelines we have for Christianity and biblical living," McDonough said. "This is not an attempt to beat on these individuals. Our position is that God certainly loves all of his creation. But homosexual behavior is wrong. It's a sin."

Next year's meeting is scheduled Nov. 9-10 in Richmond.

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-- Alberta Lindsey contributed to this story.

## **Tennessee Baptists escrow funds for Carson-Newman**

KINGSPORT, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Tennessee Baptist Convention voted Nov. 11 to place more than \$2.2 million budgeted for Carson-Newman College in escrow in response to an April vote by the school in Jefferson City to elect its own trustees.

Messengers at the Nov. 10-11 convention in Kingsport approved an amendment to the 1998-99 unified budget placing allocations for the 2,200-student college "in a reserve fund pending a satisfactory resolution of the violation of the bylaws, policies and programs of the Tennessee Baptist Convention which occurred on April 17, 1998."

The maker of the motion, James Stroud, pastor of Third Creek Baptist Church in Knoxville, told convention messengers that Carson-Newman trustees "violated our trust" with the April vote to revert to a self-perpetuating board. He said Carson-Newman is now "an independent college," but they still "want our money and our students."

Stroud's amendment to the budget passed following debate by a vote of 959 to 742.

In interviews after the vote was announced, Carson-Newman President Cordell Maddox said he was disappointed but not surprised by the decision. "Carson-Newman has been a Tennessee Baptist school and we will continue to be a Tennessee Baptist school," he pledged.

Carson-Newman's board of trustees amended the 147-year-old college's charter in April to allow the board to choose its own membership. Previously, Carson-Newman's 36 trustees had been nominated and elected by the state convention since 1919.

While all trustees must still be Baptists, the change allows up to 25 percent of them to be from outside of Tennessee. College officials said the move was not intended to distance the school from Tennessee Baptists but to protect it from political processes and the election of trustees with agenda other than the best interests of the institution.

Critics of the change said there is no evidence that the old method of electing trustees was no longer working.

Earlier in the convention, a "protocol for college-trustee selection" developed over several months by the state convention's education committee was referred to another committee because of reported conflicts with the convention's constitution and bylaws.

The document, which has already been approved by trustees of Carson-Newman and Tennessee Baptists' other two colleges, was a compromise aimed at guaranteeing that new trustees would be acceptable both to school administrators and the state convention.

Carson-Newman officials said what now will become of the protocol statement is unclear, but it could be considered at next year's convention in Nashville.

Maddox said Carson-Newman's trustees would meet in the near future to discuss a plan for replacing the lost convention money.

Last year, the state convention provided about \$2.4 million to Carson-Newman's budget, all of which, plus about \$1 million more, was used for scholarships for Tennessee Baptist students, a trustee spokesman said this spring.

In other business, the convention approved a \$31.4 million budget and a \$9.5 million camp-development project, along with entering into a missions partnership with Baptists in Portugal. Larry Gilmore, pastor of College Heights Baptist Church in Gallatin, was elected president over two other candidates.

Convention resolutions opposed the expansion of legalized gambling in Tennessee and affirmed the sanctity of human life.

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-- By Bob Allen and Lonnie Wilkey

## **California Baptists turn back challenges to regionalization plan**

By Mark Wyatt

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- A plan to "regionalize" the way California Southern Baptist Convention provides services to churches will continue, despite several attempts to derail the plan during the convention's 58th annual session Nov. 10-11 at the Performing Arts Center in Oxnard, Calif.

Messengers also re-elected three top officers, voted to do away with convention resolutions, and gave the green light to a number of constitution and bylaws changes designed to streamline convention structure and establish a formula for regional representation on the 40-member CSBC executive board.

Roger Spradlin won a second consecutive one-year term as CSBC president. Spradlin, pastor of Valley Baptist Church in Bakersfield, was elected by acclamation.

Also re-elected were Deryl Lackey, first vice president, and Jerry Bennett, second vice president. Lackey, pastor of First Baptist Church in Upland, defeated Bennett by a vote of 240-141 in the contest for first vice president.

In a subsequent election, Bennett, pastor of Meridian Southern Baptist Church in El Cajon, was unopposed for a second consecutive term as second vice president.

Creation of nine service areas, each comprising two or more Southern Baptist associations, was the centerpiece of a slate of recommendations developed by a special committee.

The reorganization plan will involve reassigning some employees currently concentrated at the state convention offices in Fresno. The idea is to move convention services closer to churches by placing executive board staff members in each of the nine service areas, beginning with two areas during 1999.

The nearest thing to a vote on service areas this year came when messengers defeated a motion to kill the plan to regionalize state-convention services. Charlie Leffingwell, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in San Lorenzo, urged messengers to instruct the executive board to "stop and refrain from carrying out its current plan to decentralize the staff ... and return to its plan of carrying out the will of the churches."

Following discussion, Leffingwell's motion failed by a vote of 266-130.

Another attempt to thwart the restructuring plans came from John Boykin, pastor of Emmanuel Southern Baptist Church in Dos Palos. Boykin sought to postpone action indefinitely on the entire slate of constitutional amendments. He said messengers were "being led by the nose" to change the convention "in line with what our College of Cardinals has presented to us."

Rob Zinn, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Highland and a member of the missions implementation team, urged passage of the plan. He reminded messengers that scores of people had worked countless hours to develop the plans and explained them at numerous meetings across the state.

Most messengers apparently agreed. After a motion to end debate carried, Boykin's motion to postpone action indefinitely on the constitutional amendments failed by a show of hands.

The package of proposals, known collectively as "Our Mission For A New Millennium," had sparked considerable debate among California Baptists this year because of perceived threats to associations and charges that the service areas represented a "new layer of bureaucracy."

California Baptist leaders assured convention messengers the new structure will not adversely affect associations.

"The regional concept is not building a new purpose, just an attempt to find a more efficient way to bring services to the local churches. Nothing is changing in the relationship between the convention and associations and churches," said Larry Dotson, chairman of the state convention's executive board.

One of the most significant changes enacted by messengers guarantees at least two executive board members from each service area. The remaining 22 executive board members will be selected according to how many churches there are in each service area; areas with a greater number of churches will be eligible for more representation than areas with fewer churches. Previously, executive board members were selected without any formal consideration of geographical location or associational representation.

The reorganization plan calls for combining or eliminating several committees, including a state convention committee on resolutions, despite complaints by one messenger that doing so would silence "an important vehicle of influence."

"This is a very emotional issue for me," said Wiley Drake, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Buena Park and a frequent contributor of resolutions at both the California and the Southern Baptist conventions.

"How are we going to speak as a group to the world?" Drake asked. "Motions speak in-house, resolutions to the world at large."

He also refuted claims by opponents that resolutions have no teeth.

"No effect? Try telling that to the Disney Corporation," Drake said, referring to a Southern Baptist-led boycott of Disney products and services. Drake said the boycott that was sparked by a resolution he introduced at a Southern Baptist Convention meeting has had significant financial impact on the entertainment conglomerate.

"Why would we want to set aside an important vehicle of influence?" he asked.

Several messengers responded, including the chair of the CSBC resolutions committee. Jean Bracy, a messenger from New Hope Community Church in Apple Valley, said resolutions produce "more divisiveness than unanimity."

"Any statement adopted here does not represent all the churches. We vote with our feet folks," Bracy declared. "Whenever we go home to do the resolutions, the most effective vote we take, the most effective message we speak is how we vote with our feet."

Messengers approved a record \$14.6 million convention budget for 1999 with almost no discussion.

Among items up for consideration at the 1999 CSBC annual meeting is a proposed constitutional amendment introduced this year to shorten the name to California Baptist Convention. A similar attempt failed in 1986.

Next year's California Southern Baptist Convention meeting is scheduled Nov. 16-17 in Sacramento.

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## **Oklahoma Baptists reject resolution challenging SBC 'family' statement**

BETHANY, Okla. (ABP) -- Oklahoma Baptists overwhelmingly rejected a resolution that would have placed their state convention at odds with the Southern Baptist Convention's recent statement on the family.

At the state convention's Nov. 9-10 annual meeting at Council Road Baptist Church in Bethany, Bruce Prescott, a member of First Baptist Church in Norman, offered a resolution from the floor urging Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary to stop requiring faculty members to sign the new family amendment to the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Prescott, director of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists, said the amendment "divisively requires wives to submit to their husbands" based on Ephesians 5:22, "without giving due consideration to the biblical command to 'submit to one another out of reverence for Christ,'" in Ephesians 5:21.

Prescott said the state convention should address the policy at the seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, because many Oklahoma students go there and the state's Baptists support it indirectly through their unified budget.

Anthony Jordan, Oklahoma Baptists' executive director and chairman of a special study committee which drafted the family amendment approved by the Southern Baptist Convention in June, said the seminary has a right to impose the statement on professors. Faculty members at the seminary have always been required "to teach in accordance with the 'Baptist Faith and Message' as passed in 1963 and as amended," he said.

After a short debate, the convention soundly defeated the resolution, with about 30 hands rising to support Prescott's motion out of a convention crowd officially numbered at 1,007.

Prescott and Dan Hobbs, Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists' president, told the Daily Oklahoman newspaper the group was formed to help the state's Baptists understand actions taken by leaders in the Southern Baptist denomination. The group is moderate, while leadership of both the state convention and the national SBC are overwhelmingly conservative.

Convention messengers overwhelmingly approved resolutions "opposing violence as a response to contemporary moral issues" and calling for elected officials to exhibit the "highest standards of moral purity."

The convention passed a record \$19.6 million budget and elected officers. The convention theme, "Leading Kingdom Churches," highlighted missions partnerships with Indiana and Malawi.

James Robinson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Clinton, was elected president, defeating David Willets, pastor of Parkview Baptist Church in Tulsa and the convention's outgoing first vice president.

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-- By ABP staff. Dave Parker and Pat Gilliland contributed to this story.

## **Arkansas Baptist president ministers to youth convicted of school massacre**

By Trennis Henderson

ALEXANDER, Ark. (ABP) -- Much has been written recently about ministry to victims, families and communities in the wake of a seeming epidemic of youth violence. But Greg Kirksey, the recently re-elected president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, faces the unusual opportunity and challenge of reaching out to perpetrators.

Kirksey, a former pastor, began serving in August as director of Covenant Connections at Arkansas' Alexander Youth Services Center, a state juvenile-detention center. Kirksey describes Covenant Connections as a national pilot project "between the juvenile-detention facility and Boys and Girls Club of America to bring the community and the corrections effort into partnership."

Although "I didn't know what I would find" in the new ministry position, Kirksey said, "I knew I was there on God's assignment."

Ten days after he started working at the facility, the two youngsters convicted of killing four fellow students and a teacher earlier this year in Jonesboro, Ark., were transferred to Alexander. The deadly March ambush at Westside Middle School -- one of several school-shooting rampages during the past year -- prompted widespread media coverage throughout the nation.

Describing Mitchell Johnson, 13, and Andrew Golden, 11, as "two of the most notorious killers in the history of this state," Kirksey said their actions "have left scars on Jonesboro that will last for a lifetime."

Describing some of his ministry experiences during his state-convention presidential address in November, Kirksey said former Department of Youth Services Director Paul Doramus asked if he would consider serving as "those two Jonesboro boys' pastor."

"I choked with emotion, because somehow I knew in the back of my mind that was why I was there," said Kirksey, who also is a volunteer chaplain in the facility's serious-offenders unit.

Emphasizing that "I don't want to minimize the pain or hurt in any way that they have inflicted upon that community," Kirksey added, "I don't look at Mitchell or Andrew as monsters. Jesus was not willing that any should perish."

Kirksey compared ministry among juvenile offenders to the example set in the Bible story about Christ healing a leper. "The world saw a leper; Jesus saw a man who needed to be touched," Kirksey said.

Although "I am absolutely stunned at the hatred in our world," Kirksey declared, "I am even more stunned and ashamed of the meanness in our churches. ... We banish people, we isolate them, we shun them because they don't fit into our world. They are not our kind. ... We must guard against becoming hard and cruel. If anything, we need more of the grace of compassion."

In his first meeting with Mitchell Johnson, Kirksey was introduced as a Baptist pastor who had recently joined the staff. He said Johnson's immediate response was: "You are the answer to my prayer."

"I said, 'Mitchell, what do you mean by that?' He said, 'When I came, I asked if there was a preacher or a chaplain that I could talk to and they said we didn't have one. So I started praying that God would send somebody that I could talk to about him and you are the answer to my prayer.'"

Reflecting on that experience, Kirksey asked: "Who is going to reach out to a love-starved guy like Mitchell if not the Christian community? Where does he turn? Where does he go if he repents? Is there any hope or is he damned forever? Has he committed the unpardonable sin? Do we throw him in the dumpster for life, for eternity?"

In a recent president's column in the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine, Kirksey said some people expressed concern that he was "leaving the ministry" when he moved from the pastorate to his current position at Alexander.

"It is troubling because it reflects a narrow perspective of ministry held by a growing number of Christians," Kirksey wrote. "If we continue to confine our Christianity to Christian radio, Christian television, Christian businesses and Christian gatherings, we will eventually choke the gospel to death."

Since beginning his work with juvenile offenders, "I have never felt more deeply immersed in ministry, nor more needed than I am on that campus," he said. "Daily I am with boys and girls in trouble who regularly ask me for a Bible or some other help with spiritual guidance. Many of them have hit bottom, with nowhere else to turn and no family who cares. They are the 'throw-aways' in our disposable society."

Describing himself as "part of God's salvage team sifting through the broken pieces of young lives," Kirksey said he is pleased that God "has strategically located me in a place far removed from the squeaky-clean atmosphere many associate with ministry, to work with juveniles for whom the gospel really is good news."

Insisting that today's church "is missing a grand opportunity to proclaim the gospel to our nation," Kirksey told the convention crowd, "Grace is something that is easy to talk about and sing about in church. It is easy to study and teach, but when we personalize it and we put a face on it, then it becomes another matter. We say, 'Not in this instance,' and we begin to make it a conditional thing."

"When you make grace conditional," he warned, "that is not New Testament."

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