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

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Florida Baptists elect black president, participate in missionary appointment

By Barbara Denman

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (ABP) -- Florida Baptists made history this year, electing their first African-American president and taking part in the commissioning of a record group of missionaries in a first-ever International Mission Board appointment held in conjunction with a Baptist state convention.

Elroy Barber, pastor of Westside Baptist Church in Hollywood, was unanimously elected president of the Florida Baptist State Convention, which met Nov. 16-18 at the Broward County Convention Center in Fort Lauderdale. At the conclusion of his election, messengers gave the 53-year-old pastor a standing ovation.

Barber, the first African American to be elected president of a Baptist state convention in the South, was nominated by Dan Southerland, pastor of the Flamingo Road Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale. He cited Barber's experience as a pastor of a church with 250 members that had sponsored 18 mission churches. Barber previously served as moderator of the Gulf Stream Baptist Association, president of the state's African-American fellowship and a member of the Florida Baptist state board of missions. Last year he was the convention's first vice president.

Others officers elected were layman Wayne Goff of First Baptist Church in Port Charlotte, as first vice president; Jerry Stone, pastor of the West Orange Baptist Church in Oakland, second vice president; and Ron Hobbs, minister of music at College Park Baptist Church in Ocala, recording secretary.

A highlight for messengers and guests came as 90 missionary candidates -- the largest group in the history of the Southern Baptist Convention -- walked down the aisle of the convention center to be commissioned and gave one-minute inspirational testimonies about their call to international missions.

The missionaries were charged to their places of service by Jerry Rankin, president of the SBC International Mission Board, whose only daughter and son-in-law were among those commissioned.

The convention also honored John and Nancy Sullivan for his 10 years of service as executive director-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention. A reception following the Monday night session was held in their honor with hundreds of people greeting the couple.

A number of business matters were transacted with no discussion. Approval was given to a nearly \$27.9 million Cooperative Program budget, which will send 40 percent to Southern Baptist causes and retain 60 percent for Florida Baptist missions and ministries. Also approved was the merger of the Jacksonville Baptist Children's Home with Florida Baptist Family Ministries, a state convention agency. The only resolution presented was one of appreciation to the host city.

The convention approved a plan to pray for 777 days leading into the Third Millennium, which officially begins Jan. 1, 2001. Intercessory prayer focus during the meeting highlighted Florida-born international missionaries.

Next year's Florida Baptist State Convention is scheduled to meet Nov. 15-17 1999 in Orlando.

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Southern Baptist mission board sets aside \$1 million for hurricane relief

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board will spend \$1 million from operating reserves for special hurricane-relief efforts in Central America.

The agency's trustees, meeting Nov. 16-18 in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., approved the special expenditures. Officials at the IMB said funds previously budgeted for relief ministries were nearly depleted from recent disasters in Bangladesh, the Caribbean and Central America.

In other business, trustees approved a record budget of almost \$230 million and appointed 90 new missionaries. They also heard a challenge by SBC president Paige Patterson to set a goal of 500,000 overseas baptisms next year and tabled until January a motion made at last summer's SBC annual meeting to reaffirm the agency's policy against appointing divorced persons as missionaries.

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-- By ABP staff

Former Southwestern Journal editor takes post at Texas Christian University

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- A professor who was dismissed last year for criticizing administrators at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has taken a new job at Texas Christian University. Both schools are located in Fort Worth, Texas.

Jeff Pool became director of annual giving at TCU's Brite Divinity School Sept. 1, according to a recent newsletter, and will also teach classes.

Pool is a former assistant professor of systematic theology at Southwestern Seminary and was editor of the seminary's "Southwestern Journal of Theology." He was removed from the classroom after accusing the seminary's administration of "academic censorship" for stopping publication of an issue of the journal because it included writers identified as "moderates" in Southern Baptist controversy.

Southwestern officials said they feared the journal would alienate conservatives but denied censorship charges. Pool later accepted a severance agreement. The journal articles were published as a book titled "Sacred Mandates of Conscience: Interpretations of the Baptist Faith and Message" by Smyth and Helwys Publishing in Macon, Ga.

Pool is a graduate of Wayland Baptist University. He received the M.Div. degree from Southwestern Seminary and a master's in philosophy from TCU. He received his doctorate from the University of Chicago. In addition to being on the faculty at Southwestern, he also has taught at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in the Czech Republic and at Phillips Graduate Seminary.

Pool's recent hiring was announced in a newsletter for Brite Divinity School's Baptist Studies Program, which described him as "a valuable addition to a growing number of Baptist faculty and students at Brite."

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-- By ABP staff

Gardner-Webb names divinity school in honor of President Chris White

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C. (ABP) -- Trustees of Gardner-Webb University have named their divinity school after the school's current president, Chris White.

The board voted in October to rename the program the M. Christopher White School of Divinity in honor of White's vision to start the school in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The university in Boiling Springs, N.C., opened the divinity school in 1993 with 35 students. Today, enrollment has grown to 130 students in three separate degree programs.

Gardner-Webb was the first Baptist-affiliated college in North Carolina to begin a divinity program. Two other schools, Campbell and Wake Forest, have since followed suit.

Enrollment at Campbell University's divinity school grew 40 percent at the beginning of its third year, to 123 students, officials at the school in Buies Creek announced recently. Ninety-two percent of the school's students are Baptist and 70 percent did their undergraduate work at a school other than Campbell.

Wake Forest University, located in Winston-Salem, is scheduled to open its divinity school in 1999. Officials expect an inaugural class of 35 students, with a goal of building up to 135-150 students within three years.

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-- By ABP staff

Wake Forest divinity school establishes fellowship program

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Wake Forest University has established a fellowship program for students of its divinity school, which is scheduled to open in 1999.

The new Sarah and Samuel Wait Fellowship in Theology and Ministry will offer full scholarships to up to eight incoming divinity students each year, according to a press release. The awards will be renewable for up to three years.

"The fellowship will provide a level of support students need to focus fully on their studies and formation for ministry," said Scott Hudgins, director of student recruitment for the divinity school.

The fellowship is named in honor of two founders of both the university in Winston-Salem and the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

Recipients will be selected on the basis of academic achievement and promise for Christian ministry. Nominations are being accepted, and the awards will be announced after Feb. 1, officials said.

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-- By ABP staff

Anti-hunger group hails passage of law

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Bread for the World, a grassroots hunger organization, praised the passage of a bill that supporters said will target United States aid to more effectively fight poverty in Africa.

The Africa: Seeds of Hope Act was passed by the Senate in the waning hours of the 105th Congress. The bill was passed earlier by the House. President Clinton signed it into law Nov. 13.

The bill directs the government to reprioritize U.S. aid to focus on small-scale African farmers and rural entrepreneurs, who represent the large majority of African people.

"We're very excited about the passage of this legislation," said David Beckman, Bread for the World president. Beckman said the bill "will refocus U.S. aid to Africa more effectively to fight hunger and poverty, and it will make a real difference in the lives of ordinary people in Africa."

The bipartisan bill was sponsored in the House by Rep. Doug Bereauter (R-Neb.) and Lee Hamilton (D-Ind.) and in the Senate by Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio) and Sen. Paul Sarbanes (D-Md.).

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-- By ABP staff

Baptist state conventions take up issues in fall meetings

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- Rifts between moderates and conservatives, stances on social issues including homosexuality and conflicts related to Baptist-affiliated colleges and universities highlighted this fall's round of annual meetings of Baptist state conventions.

Moderates solidified control of the largest state Baptist group, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, by re-electing a slate of officers by acclamation and giving final approval to constitutional changes that permit the convention to operate autonomously of the Southern Baptist Convention. Texas Baptists also rejected an attempt by conservatives to defund the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty coalition in Washington, and adopted a resolution on the "biblical equality" of men and women, a rebuttal of a widely publicized statement passed by the SBC this summer urging wives to "graciously submit" to their husbands.

Discouraged by their efforts to influence the 2.5 million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas, conservatives severed ties and started their own state convention. The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention held a constitution service Nov. 10 in Houston, citing differences with the moderate-led BGCT.

In Missouri, meanwhile, conservatives captured all four elected offices following a campaign aimed at encouraging conservatives to attend and vote at the state convention. Materials for the Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association "Project 1000" campaign said the group intends to move the Missouri Baptist Convention from a "center-left" to a "center-right" majority. The group accuses previous leadership of tolerating "liberalism," including the Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Among resolutions passed by the convention was one affirming "the legitimacy of home-based education" and supporting parents who choose to home school their children.

For the second year in a row, Louisiana Baptists elected a consensus candidate for president following several years of contested votes dividing moderates and conservatives mainly related to the operation of Louisiana College. Bob Anderson, who was elected last year on a platform of bringing peace to warring factions, was unchallenged for a second term. Resolutions passed by the convention opposed gambling, supported the passage of a state law to strengthen religious liberty, urged prayer for elected officials and encouraged efforts to fight illiteracy.

The Georgia Baptist Convention amended its constitution to exclude churches which "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior." Proposed language to also withdraw fellowship from churches that encourage charismatic worship practices did not receive a required two-thirds majority.

The Baptist General Association of Virginia "commended" a statement on homosexuality presented by the state's Christian life committee. The statement affirmed "the biblical teaching that homosexual behavior is sinful and unacceptable for Christians" but also offered guidelines for expressing "Christ-like compassion for homosexual persons."

Virginia Baptists approved a resolution affirming the sanctity of marriage while declining to consider a statement that would have affirmed the Southern Baptist Convention's recent statement on the family.

A second Virginia state Baptist convention, meanwhile, met separately. Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, which formed in 1996, welcomed 54 new churches, bringing its total to 212. Among business, the conservative convention passed a resolution affirming the new article on the family passed by the Southern Baptist Convention in June.

Tennessee Baptists voted to withhold \$2.2 in funds budgeted for Carson-Newman College until a dispute over election of the school's trustees is resolved. Trustees of the school in Jefferson City voted this spring to elect their own successors. Previously trustees were elected by the convention. A compromise aimed at ensuring that future trustees would be acceptable to both the state convention and three Tennessee Baptist-related schools was scheduled to be presented but was referred to a committee over reported conflicts with the convention's constitution.

North Carolina Baptists passed a resolution criticizing alcohol sales on the campus of Wake Forest University but recognizing the right of the school's trustees to set its policies. The convention backed off an earlier threat to sever a "fraternal relationship" with the university, which was founded by the state convention but is governed by a separate board. Despite the university's Baptist roots, most students today are non-Baptists.

The North Carolina convention elected Mac Brunson, a conservative, to a traditional second year as president and heard an interim report from a committee established last year to explore ways of sharing leadership among the state's conservative and moderate factions.

In Arkansas, where President Clinton recently wrote a letter apologizing to his home church for his behavior in the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, the state convention passed a resolution urging prayer both for Clinton and for Congress as it considers impeachment proceedings. Other resolutions affirmed the priesthood of all believers and the autonomy of the local church, against a backdrop of criticism aimed at Immanuel Baptist Church for tolerating Clinton as a member. A resolution offered from the floor that would have affirmed churches' responsibility to discipline erring members did not pass.

Arkansas convention president Greg Kirksey, a moderate, was elected to a traditional second term, despite a challenge by the outgoing president of the state's annual pastors' conference.

Indiana Baptists heard a report that University Baptist Church in Bloomington has been thrown out of its association for calling a woman as pastor. A question about whether the state convention will take similar action was referred to the state's executive committee. No action to disfellowship the church is expected until the 1999 annual meeting.

Florida Baptists elected their first-ever African-American president, Elroy Barber, pastor of Westside Baptist Church in Hollywood. They also took part in commissioning a record 90 appointees of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board. While it is common for commissioning services to be held at various sites around the country, this was the first to be held in conjunction with the annual meeting of a Baptist state convention.

In Spokane, Wash., meanwhile, the Northwest Baptist Convention opened its annual meeting Nov. 15 with a commissioning service for 105 new missionaries of the North American Mission Board.

In Kentucky, Louisville bank executive Charles Barnes became the first layman in 23 years to be elected president of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

In a peaceful convention, Mississippi Baptists re-elected an entire slate of officers by acclamation and gave final approval to constitutional changes to allow joint nomination of trustees to convention agencies. One convention resolution opposed "the plague of gambling." A proposed resolution on "breaking fellowship with the president of the United States" was not reported out of committee.

California Southern Baptists left in place a plan to offer state convention services regionally rather than just the current central state office. Efforts to derail the plan failed. Among changes of the reorganization was elimination of a state convention resolutions committee.

South Carolina passed a resolution opposing "all forms of legalized gambling" in the state which recently elected a governor who ran on a platform supporting a state lottery to fund education. Another resolution urged churches to support marriages as a way to fight divorce.

Oklahoma Baptists also held a harmonious meeting, aside from an unsuccessful effort by a moderate group to pass a resolution distancing the conservative state convention from the Southern Baptist Convention's recent statement on families. The convention did adopt resolutions opposing violence as a response to moral issues and calling for high moral character among elected officials.

Maryland/Delaware Baptists established a new partnership with Baptists in Mississippi and passed resolutions on a variety of moral issues. James McBride, a Delaware director of missions nominated as an "apolitical" presidential candidate, won the top office in a three-way race. Conservatives had held the office the last four years. Resolutions opposed abortion and the use of fetal tissue in research, spoke out against pornography, euthanasia and homosexuality and also called on religious leaders to live morally and for Christians not to be apathetic.

Southern Baptists in Utah and Idaho welcomed seven new churches, crediting an increase in new-church starts to last summer's Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Salt Lake City. Guest speakers included past SBC president Tom Elliff.

New York Baptists installed a new executive director at their Nov. 5-6 convention in East Hanover, N.J. Jerry Boyd Graham, 62, became the convention's fourth executive in June after taking early retirement from the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board.

Nevada Baptists celebrated their 20th anniversary as a state convention, meeting in Redrock Baptist Church in Las Vegas, the same site where the convention constituted in 1978.

Illinois Baptists elected Effingham pastor Roger Marshall as their president. Marshall, former first vice president, presided over the Nov. 4-5 annual convention in place of president Eugene Gibson, who died in March. Messengers debated a resolution urging churches to "reinstigate the biblical practice of church discipline" before killing the measure by passing a motion to postpone it indefinitely.

The Baptist Convention of New England debated before referring for further review a proposed constitutional change that would establish an "at-large" status to allow churches in membership which do not belong to a local association or the Southern Baptist Convention.

Southern Baptists in Michigan approved resolutions against doctor-assisted suicide and suggesting churches prepare for ministry and witness in light of the potential Y2K computer crisis.

The Ohio Baptist Convention passed a resolution thanking LifeWay Christian Resources, formerly called the Baptist Sunday School Board, for reopening two book stores in Toledo after a four-year absence.

South Dakota Southern Baptists welcomed W.D. "Doc" Lindsey as the executive director of their fellowship at their annual meeting Oct. 22-23. Lindsey, former director of state missions and evangelism for the Minnesota-Wisconsin Baptist Convention, was elected Oct. 3 and began his new job Nov. 1.

Kansas-Nebraska Baptists approved one resolution supporting crisis-pregnancy centers, another affirming godly families and one urging prayer for elected officials and the "moral crisis" in government.

Baptists in Alaska entered into a 3-year missions partnership with Baptists in far eastern Russia.

Colorado Baptists adopted a 10 percent budget increase, including funds for a women's missions and ministries director. The job will include programming for Woman's Missionary Union, which was cut during a budget crunch in the 1980s.

The Canadian Convention of Southern Baptists, meeting in May, elected French-Canadian native Gerry Taillon as its new national ministry leader. He succeeds Allen Schmidt, who retired in July after 13 years in the post.

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