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**Conservatives sweep
Louisiana convention**

MONROE, La. (ABP) -- Following two years of quiet convention meetings, Louisiana Baptists returned to fractious debate between conservatives and moderates, with conservatives winning key votes Nov. 15-16 in Monroe.

Departing from a tradition of contested presidential elections, conservatives and moderates in the Louisiana Baptist Convention agreed to back consensus candidates in 1997 and 1998. This year, however, no such candidate emerged.

Instead, Baton Rouge pastor Tommy French, backed by the conservative Louisiana Inerrancy Fellowship, defeated the moderate-backed candidate 905-804. A moderate group, Friends of Louisiana College, backed John Alley of Alexandria.

Conservatives then succeeded in passing a resolution placing the state convention on record, for the first time, as affirming the Bible is literally true. The non-binding resolution affirmed the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement on Scripture and further described the Bible as the "inspired, infallible, inerrant and sufficient Word of God."

Earlier, the convention fell just short of casting a required two-thirds vote that would have added similar language to the convention's bylaws.

While moderates say they believe the Bible as much as conservatives, conservatives tend to interpret it more literally. Many, citing inerrancy, say the Bible is accurate in all matters it addresses -- including science and history. Moderates, on the other hand, tend to view some parts of the Bible as symbolic rather than literal.

The convention opened in dramatic fashion with its top paid executive decrying people on both sides for perpetuating division.

"One small group of leaders on one extreme uses loyalty to Louisiana College as a rallying cry for their cause," said Louisiana Baptist Convention Executive Director Dean Doster. "If you don't vote for their candidate, then you don't support Louisiana College. Listen, we all know that is not true."

"Another small group of leaders on the other extreme uses loyalty to the authority of the Bible as a rallying cry for their cause," he continued. "If you don't vote for their candidate, you don't believe the Bible. We all know that's not true."

Doster said he believes 95 percent of Louisiana Baptists reject both extremes and want instead to "build trust."

Doster asked the convention to defuse elections by removing appointive powers of the president. Messengers considered but defeated a motion asking the Executive Committee to study the concept of changing the Committee on Committees so it is elected by the convention instead of appointed by the president.

Doster also asked that the convention request both political organizations to cease publication of newsletters.

Following Doster's report, about half the convention audience rose to applaud. Later discussions, meanwhile, made it clear that some took offense at characterizations used by the executive director.

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-- By Lacy Thompson and Bob Allen

Tennessee Baptists reject bylaw defining relationship with schools

FRANKLIN, Tenn. (ABP) -- Baptists in Tennessee voted down a proposed bylaw that would have altered the way trustees are elected at a college and two universities affiliated with their state convention.

The bylaw, which called for the Tennessee Baptist Convention to fill trustee vacancies with nominees acceptable both to the state convention and the particular school, fell 70 votes short of the two-thirds majority it needed to pass.

The proposal grew out of a conflict over Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn. Last year, the school's trustees declared themselves a self-perpetuating board. The vote changing Carson-Newman's charter followed a trend in other states to protect moderate Baptist schools from being taken over by conservatives.

The state convention responded to the 1998 trustee vote by placing more than \$2.2 million it had budgeted for Carson-Newman in escrow.

Critics said this year's proposal was nothing more than a "back door" to let the college back into the convention. Proponents, however, said the plan also would benefit the state's other two Baptist schools -- Belmont University in Nashville and Union University in Jackson -- by clarifying issues important for accreditation.

The defeated bylaw would have required that school administrators and a state-convention nominating committee mutually agree on prospective trustees. It permitted challenges to individual nominees only for specified reasons. The state convention would have continued to elect the boards of trustees, which the bylaw spelled out as being solely responsible for the institution.

In related business at the Nov. 16-17 convention at First Baptist Church in Franklin, messengers voted to release funds for Carson-Newman escrowed last year in light of the college's cooperation in developing the proposed bylaw. Funds for Carson-Newman in the 1999-2000 budget remain in escrow, however, unless trustees rescind last year's vote changing the charter.

The convention also observed its 125th anniversary and elected Jerry Tidwell, pastor of West Jackson Baptist Church in Jackson, as president for the coming year. He was unopposed for the office. Fletcher Allen, retired editor of the state convention newspaper Baptist and Reflector, won a race for first-vice president over Marvin Spivey, pastor of Ardmore Baptist Church in Memphis, by five votes, 265-260.

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-- By ABP staff

American Baptist General Board postpones ouster of pro-gay churches

CHERRY HILL, N.J. (ABP) -- The General Board of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. has amended its June vote expelling four churches over homosexuality, giving them more time to seek membership in a new region.

The June ruling denied appeals by four California congregations that were previously removed by their regional body for their "welcoming and affirming" stance toward gays.

According to American Baptist News Service, the General Board amended the action in November to postpone termination of denominational status for the four churches until June 30, 2001. The vote gives the ousted congregations more time to seek membership in another of the 33 regions that are part of the 5,800-church denomination.

The four churches -- First Baptist Church in Berkeley, Lakeshore Baptist Church in Oakland, New Community of Faith in San Jose and San Leandro Community Church in San Francisco -- all were previously members of American Baptist Churches in the West. They also belong to the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, a 6-year-old group of about 30 churches that open their membership to lesbian, gay and bisexual persons.

Among rules in the denomination's "common criteria" is that a congregation must belong to a region in order to be recognized as an American Baptist church.

Eight separate regions have challenged the General Board decision through a formal process called "adjudication." The regional groups requesting adjudication are Chicago, Connecticut, Philadelphia, Massachusetts, Wisconsin, the South and metropolitan and upstate New York.

The November General Board motion, made by William Apel of Oregon, said it was intended to allow time to resolve "pending issues" raised by adjudication and "minimize conflicts" among American Baptists.

Meanwhile, another Welcoming and Affirming church that narrowly won its appeal before the General Board in June has been accepted into a new region.

First Baptist Church in Granville, Ohio, joined the American Baptist Churches of the Rochester/Genesee of New York State in October. Delegates of the region voted 69-5 to accept the church, which had been disfellowshipped by the American Baptist Churches of Ohio for its outreach to gays.

Despite expelling the four California churches in June, the General Board voted by five votes to accept the Ohio church's appeal. Observers could not explain why the board found one church in compliance with common criteria and not the other four. As a result, First Baptist Church in Granville remained an American Baptist congregation without a regional home until its acceptance by the New York group.

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-- By ABP staff

Alliance of Baptists qualifies for membership in NCC

CLEVELAND (ABP) -- The 125-church Alliance of Baptists has been declared eligible to become the 36th member communion of the National Council of Churches.

A Nov. 10 vote by the NCC General Assembly sets the stage for a final vote next year establishing formal membership and seating an Alliance delegation.

Stan Hastey, executive director of the Washington-based Alliance, called the General Assembly vote "an act of true grace."

The Alliance would become the sixth Baptist group to join the ecumenical organization linking most mainline-Protestant and Eastern Orthodox denominations in the United States.

The Alliance of Baptists, with an aggregate church membership of 60,000, was established in 1986 to protest actions of conservatives who at the time were gaining control of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The group's covenant statement includes commitment to "the larger body of Jesus Christ, expressed in various Christian traditions" and pledges "cooperation with believers everywhere in giving full expression to the gospel."

The Alliance's interfaith efforts have included cooperation with other progressive Baptist groups, conversations with others including the United Church of Christ, and dialogue between Baptists and Jews.

Hastey said the Alliance has from its start envisioned being a part of the NCC. "We Baptists in the South have isolated ourselves from the rest of the world for far too long," he said. He called the membership vote "a milestone of significance" for the Baptist group, according to an NCC press release. Hastey could not be reached for additional comment.

The Progressive National Baptist Convention endorsed the Alliance of Baptists' application. The predominantly black convention and the predominantly white Alliance have a history of cooperation on ministries including mission work in Cuba, said Tyrone Pitts, general secretary of the NCC-member PNBC.

Other Baptist members of the NCC are American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and three other predominantly African-American groups: National Baptist Convention of America; National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.; and National Missionary Baptist Convention of America.

Also at the 50th anniversary NCC General Assembly, held Nov. 8-12 in Cleveland, delegates installed new leaders and approved deep staff cuts in light of a budget shortfall.

Ambassador Andrew Young, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, was installed as the organization's president. He succeeds Craig Anderson, an Episcopalian.

The General Assembly elected Robert Edgar, a Methodist, former congressman and current president of Claremont School of Theology in California, as general secretary, the NCC's top executive post. He follows Joan Brown Campbell, a minister in both the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A., who is retiring after nine years.

Details of a draconian restructuring plan have yet to be worked out, but it will include reducing staff at the NCC's New York headquarters by a third. Thirty-four staff positions were eliminated, including three associate general secretaries and four directors.

The NCC Executive Board struggled to balance a budget in light of the most severe financial crisis of the organization's 50-year history, sparked by a nearly \$4 million shortfall in 1999.

The General Assembly also signed a pledge to fight racism and passed a policy statement of support for public schools.

Moderate leader revisits call for new Baptist convention

By Marv Knox

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- Liberty-loving Baptists must act soon to preserve religious freedom before this legacy is lost to future generations, Herbert Reynolds warned a gathering of "mainstream" Baptists.

And a Baptist Convention of the Americas may be the mechanism for preserving that freedom, Reynolds declared at the annual meeting of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists Nov. 15 in Oklahoma City. His declaration extended an idea he first presented last year.

Representatives from 11 states attended the Oklahoma City meeting as well as a smaller gathering the previous day to discuss the status of their respective state Baptist conventions. That Nov. 14 meeting was convened by John Baugh, a business executive from Houston, and Reynolds, chancellor of Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

The mainstream movement encompasses so-called moderate Baptists who have opposed efforts to import the Southern Baptist Convention's "conservative resurgence" -- what they have called a "fundamentalist takeover" -- into the state conventions.

"Fundamentalism tears at the fabric of the gospel and our Baptist distinctives," threatening to rip apart freedom vital to people of faith, Reynolds said. "We should oppose it with all our might, not only for the sake of the gospel and for our particular way of propagating it but very much as a matter of stewardship toward future generations.

Reynolds described "soul freedom," or freedom of conscience, as an important Baptist principle that is under attack today.

Baptists' principles of freedom, Reynolds said, include "individual soul freedom and interpreting the Bible for ourselves, priesthood of all believers, accepting Christ freely and personally, following the will of Christ as we find it in the New Testament, the autonomy of the local church and the separation of church and state."

He said leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention in recent years have worked to "circumscribe, curtail or remove the freedom of others."

That trend will continue and even worsen, he added.

For example, he predicted a committee that is revising the "Baptist Faith and Message," a doctrinal statement approved by the SBC in 1963, will more narrowly define the nature of Scripture. "Inerrancy of the Scriptures has been all-pervasive for the past 35 years, since the fundamentalists did not think the 1963 statement went far enough doctrinally," he said. "They always have been unhappy with it."

Another example is the political strategy of the Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association and the Texas Baptist Laymen's Association, which uses "guilt by association" to "discredit and demean any group which opposes their fundamentalist takeover mentality and methods," he added.

Moderate Baptists were called "a cancer" and labeled "the enemy" by Bill Powell, an early strategist and champion of the "conservative resurgence," Reynolds recalled.

By 1990, the SBC had been changed, with "mainstream" Baptists disenfranchised, he said. "The Southern Baptist Convention is gone, probably for good or at least until the younger fundamentalists die off about mid-21st century. But mainstream Baptists at the state level, in collaboration with the large body of alumni and friends of our colleges and universities, can still redeem our great state conventions for new visions and goals for the cause of Christ. And surely it is worth our best effort to try to do so."

However, about a dozen state conventions are "controlled or dominated by the fundamentalists," he lamented. "You are going to have to decide whether you are willing to spend the time, talent, efforts and financial resources to plan a strategy, organize your forces, direct the tactical events, coordinate everything to ensure coherence, cohesion and completeness, and to follow up to turn the tide of battle.

"The fundamentalists declared early on that you, we, were the enemy, so we have to engage them -- not using their methods of untruth, distortion, slander, libel and innuendo -- but through education of the laity, persuasiveness and out-maneuvering them to the point of producing decisive votes at the annual state convention."

The methods include "telling the truth, living out (God's) word instead of arguing over what the word is, and keeping our eyes and ears open to the Master Teacher, who is still our guide and who is our greatest inspiration and hope for fulfillment of our stewardship," he said. "We must take the high road and capture the high ground and pray fervently that the Lord will bless our efforts to bless posterity."

Affirming the possibility of that outcome, he called upon like-minded Baptists to take "interim steps to bring us into a closer alliance."

One such step is the possibility of forming a "council of Mainstream Baptists," Reynolds said. The smaller group of representatives from the various states discussed that possibility in their meeting the previous day, he reported.

In that representative meeting, participants described the theological/political situations in their state conventions. They talked about forming a council for mutual support and creating a "center for Baptist principles" to provide resources. They also agreed to meet after the first of the year to discuss how they might proceed.

Turning to a more comprehensive vision for mainstream Baptists, Reynolds described for the larger group his idea of creating a Baptist Convention of the Americas. He first surfaced the idea at a Texas Baptists Committed meeting in November 1998.

In Oklahoma City, he announced he had secured articles of incorporation for the organization with the Texas secretary of state and filed federal papers to preserve the organization's trademark.

The needs and challenges are huge, he said, noting North and South America are home to 800 million people, a population that is expected to rise to 1 billion in about a decade, he said.

"That is one-seventh to one-eighth of the world's population at our hemispheric doorstep, involving 300 million to 400 million non-adherents to the Christian faith, with an untold need for education and benevolent services," he added.

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Southern Baptists of Texas hold second annual convention

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- The new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention continued to define itself in contrast to the Baptist General Convention of Texas and as a bastion of doctrinal purity during its second annual convention Nov. 17.

The conservative breakaway group from the BGCT held its constitutional convention last November in Houston. The group was formed, its leaders have said, to create a state convention that will walk in closer step with the Southern Baptist Convention and take more conservative stances on political and theological issues.

That distinction was highlighted both in speeches made and resolutions passed during the daylong meeting at Criswell College in Dallas, with about 500 registered messengers in attendance.

The most direct rejoinder to the BGCT came in the form of a resolution affirming the SBC's 1998 addition of an article on family to the denomination's "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement. A

week before, messengers to the BGCT annual session in El Paso had overwhelmingly voted to endorse the 1963 doctrinal statement without the 1998 addition.

The SBC's added article on family has drawn national attention because it says, in part, that husbands should be the heads of their families and wives should submit to the leadership of their husbands.

The SBTC resolution calls the amended statement "theologically sound, doctrinally correct and biblically correct in its instruction."

Richard Land, executive director of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, drew repeated applause during his report, in which he charged the BGCT had abdicated its Baptist heritage.

"As a sixth-generation Texan, ... it is great to be with the real Texas Baptists," he said to applause. And as a member of the drafting committee of the SBC's article on family, "I appreciate your affirmation of the Apostle Paul and disavowal of those who reject" the SBC's statement, he added.

"There are those in Texas who have drawn a target on the agencies and persons of your Southern Baptist Convention," Land asserted. "I want you to know, ... we wear that target as a badge of honor."

In an interview with the Dallas Morning News, Land said recent actions of the BGCT have "greatly added to the ranks" of the SBTC. If most Texas Baptist churches were forced to make a choice, they would choose to affiliate exclusively with the conservative convention rather than the BGCT, he said.

Throughout the convention, speakers praised the new convention for its conservative doctrine.

"I cannot have fellowship with those who do not believe the Bible is the inerrant word of God, ... who believe in culture over conviction, ... who believe it's all right to murder babies in the womb, ... who believe it's OK to ordain women as ministers and deacons," declared president Stan Coffey, pastor of San Jacinto Baptist Church in Amarillo.

Other resolutions adopted by SBTC messengers opposed abortion and euthanasia, encouraged election of "honorable and moral individuals" to government office, and supported student prayers at school sporting events, the SBC Cooperative Program and posting the Ten Commandments in public buildings.

Messengers heard from a variety of speakers during the day, including representatives of nine SBC agencies and institutions.

Guest speaker for the convention was evangelist Bailey Smith, who declared America today is the "Barabbas generation," exactly like the culture that chose the criminal Barabbas over Jesus.

America today lives with a generation of "sorry politicians," satanic power, senseless people and "spineless preachers," he declared.

Smith railed both against President Bill Clinton and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, devoting a significant portion of his message to Clinton's confessed sexual relationship with a White House intern.

"We have a Baptist in the White House," he said. "Maybe one day we'll have a Christian."

He chastised Gingrich, also a Baptist, for not taking a strong enough stand against Clinton. But Gingrich "couldn't say anything because he was involved in a six-year affair" himself, Smith said.

"The problem in Washington, D.C., is most politicians are crooked," he said. "Crooked as opposed to straight. It's a crooked man who will ... vote for abortion, ... take prayer out of our schools ... stand behind an immoral president."

Satanic power is evidenced in America today in the entertainment industry, "man-made religions" and the women's movement, Smith said.

"The entertainment industry is a work of Satan," he declared.

Likewise the feminist movement, he added. Smith said the reason some feminists have given for their activism is that they don't want any man taking advantage of them. He added that most feminists needn't worry about that. "Have you seen some of these women?" he asked.

As an example of a "man-made religion," Smith cited "Islamic fundamentalism." He admitted he is a Christian fundamentalist but drew a distinction between Christian and Islamic fundamentalists: "A fundamentalist Muslim will kill you, but a fundamentalist Christian will pray for you."

America is home to a "senseless generation" today, Smith said. America today is "trailer-park trash" and "the moron majority," he added.

This problem is compounded by "spineless preachers," he suggested. "If every preacher in America preached like John Hagee or Jerry Falwell, we might accomplish something."

Also during the convention, messengers learned of a new partnership missions link with the Nevada Baptist Convention. David Meacham, executive director of the Nevada convention, spoke to the convention and said he felt "at home in this meeting."

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