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**Baptist identity dismantled,
reforming, Bill Leonard says**

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Baptists "no longer are the center of gravity" in the South and instead today must find new ways to define and perpetuate their identity, says historian Bill Leonard.

Until the middle of the 20th century, Leonard said, Baptists built their identity through a system that linked "significant elements of Southern culture with a denominational program that carried [the] constituency from the cradle to the grave."

The result for the Southern Baptist Convention was "an undeniable hegemony over religious life in the American South," said Leonard, dean of the Wake Forest University Divinity School. "The once persecuted minority had become the establishment."

But decades of denominational infighting and shifts in Southern culture dismantled that system, Leonard told a Mainstream Baptist Consultation April 25 in Atlanta.

Among the cultural factors reshaping the Southern Baptist South, Leonard said, were the civil-rights movement, intermarriage with other denominations, and immigration. Likewise, denominational controversy weakened the participation of many churches in the SBC, particularly moderate churches.

"All this and other developments mean that the old convention system ... is collapsing or in many cases already has collapsed in its ability to create a common identity in an ever unruly constituency."

Leonard cited other factors that threaten traditional denominationalism: Younger Baptists were not raised in the "intact system" and have no frame of reference for Baptist beliefs and practices. Generation Xers have a preference for "generic Christianity" over denominations. And megachurches function as "mini-denominations," providing churches with resources traditionally drawn from denominations.

These shifts already have altered the Southern Baptist Convention, Leonard said, despite denials from SBC leaders. It is a "myth" that an intact Southern Baptist identity is still perpetuated, particularly through the six Southern Baptist seminaries, he said. "Do not believe it." That identity "is about this deep," he said, holding his fingers less than an inch apart.

Likewise, Baptist state conventions have been changed, he continued.

State conventions generally are "on their last legs," he said. "They are finished ... unless they come up with an identity other than the past."

Later, in a question-and-answer session, Leonard had some advice for "mainstream" Baptists who oppose what they call "fundamentalist" control of Baptist life. "It doesn't matter if you fight fundamentalists, because the culture has shifted," he said, making the fight for denominational control irrelevant.

Although denominational life is being forever changed, he suggested, "none of us are going to live long enough to see us come out on the other side."

Nevertheless, Leonard said he sees signs of hope among Baptists. Among them:

-- New community. Churches are discovering the value of networking with churches and organizations of other Christian traditions for resources and shared ministry.

-- New pluralism. "Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists no longer live in 'foreign lands' but across the street." The challenge is remaining unashamedly Christian while tolerating and respecting other faiths, he said.

-- New institutions. A spate of new Baptist theological schools, as well as non-Baptist seminaries, are attracting Baptist students and will bring new energy -- and new controversy -- into Baptist life.

-- New worship. Baptist congregations are becoming more diverse in their worship. Some are becoming more liturgical, others more charismatic. Others are offering a variety of styles to meet different needs.

-- New funding methods. Not new really, Baptists are returning to the society method of funding ministries beyond the local congregation, picking and choosing among causes to support, and moving away from one central funding mechanism.

-- New connections. Churches are establishing new connections with Baptist affinity groups, resource providers and non-geographic alliances, and they are connecting with traditional conventions and organizations in non-traditional ways.

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Wake Forest dean defends policy of admitting gays

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Bill Leonard, dean of the Wake Forest University Divinity School, defended the school's controversial decision to admit a homosexual, saying a seminary needs to be open to all and a safe place to work out difficult issues.

The divinity school, which opened last fall, was drawn into the controversy when it became known that one of its new students is a lesbian. But Leonard said he supports the university's policy of not discriminating on the basis of race, creed, sexual orientation or other factors.

"I'll die on this floor of non-discriminatory admissions," Leonard pledged to a group of moderate Baptists in Atlanta April 25.

The university in Winston-Salem, N.C., is involved in a controversy with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina over homosexuality. Last fall, the university said it would leave up to a local church that meets in the campus chapel to decide whether to hold a same-sex union ceremony. North Carolina Baptists responded by authorizing leaders to initiate steps to sever its fraternal relationship with the university.

One of the women requesting the church blessing is a member of the Wake Forest divinity school's inaugural class. The divinity school opened last fall.

Asked about the controversy during a question-and-answer session at a meeting of "mainstream Baptists," Leonard described it as a "tar baby."

"It just fell on me," he said. "I didn't go looking for it." But neither should the divinity school try to avoid issues like homosexuality, he said.

"There need to be some oases where we can talk about this, and the seminary needs to be one of those," he said.

To avoid the issue would be unfair to all students. "Our graduates are going to have to confront this issue in churches," he said.

Leonard noted that Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he previously taught, once would not admit blacks, women or divorced people. Baptists have been on the wrong side of most cultural issues, he said.

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- By Greg Warner

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