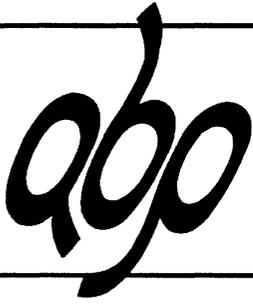


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**Southern Baptists elect
first baby boomer president**

By Bob Allen

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists elected their first baby boomer president and their first leader in the 21st century June 13 in Orlando, Fla.

James Merritt, pastor of the 12,000-member First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga., ran unopposed as president of the 15.8 million-member Southern Baptist Convention.

Merritt told reporters his top priorities would be to involve younger pastors in convention leadership and to encourage every Southern Baptist to be personally involved in an overseas mission project.

Merritt also pledged loyalty to the belief that the Bible is "inerrant," or true in every detail, and praised his predecessor, Paige Patterson, who engineered a movement to return the denomination to its conservative "roots."

"I probably would not be sitting up here if it were not for Dr. Paige Patterson and the effort he started 20 years ago," Merritt said in a post-election news conference. He said "only history will reveal" Patterson's impact on the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

In response to a reporter's question about perceptions that Southern Baptists are narrow-minded in their views toward homosexuals and women, Merritt said he wouldn't feel his doctor was narrow-minded if he told him he needed to be treated for cancer.

"I am as broad-minded as the Bible," Merritt said.

Merritt said Southern Baptists are being criticized for standing on truths revealed in Scripture, even when they are unpopular or politically incorrect. "The most perfect person who ever lived was crucified for telling the truth," he observed.

Fueling negative perceptions about Southern Baptists, Merritt said, is the fact that "when you take a stand for truth, you automatically take a stand against error."

For example, he said: "We do stand against homosexuality. At the same time, what we're really for is the family."

Merritt said the media often portray the denomination's stands in a negative light.

On another topic, Merritt said the Bible is clear in its teaching that the role of pastor is reserved for men. "The issue is not competency," he said. "The issue is the truth of the word of God and the issue is calling."

Merritt, who earned both a master-of-divinity and a doctor-of-philosophy degree at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said during seven years of study there he knew women who believed they were called to preach. "As I understand the Bible, God is bound by his own word," however, and would therefore not call a woman to be a pastor, he said.

Merritt affirmed Baptist notions of soul competency, which he said means that every Christian has direct access to God, and priesthood of the believer, which he said means "we can all enter the Holy of Holies and have fellowship with God."

Despite that equality, Merritt said the Bible also affirms a hierarchy in worship and in the home. God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of man, and "man is the head of woman," Merritt said. "I didn't make that up. That's what God said."

Merritt said he does not fear a split in the denomination. "I think the overwhelming majority of Baptists are extremely happy" with the convention's leadership he said, evidenced by record giving to the SBC's unified budget, the Cooperative Program.

He said he doesn't keep up with activities of the moderate splinter group Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, but he doesn't have a problem with any group that believes the Bible and preaches the gospel.

Asked how the SBC should relate to state conventions that allow moderate churches options to support CBF or other non-SBC causes, Merritt said he recognized the autonomy of churches and state conventions, but he is "a champion of the Cooperative Program."

"It grieves my heart to see any state convention take any action that could hurt the Cooperative Program," Merritt said.

Merritt said the denomination faces challenges such as improving evangelistic efforts among youth, but opined, "Never has there been a better time or greater time to be a Southern Baptist than today."

In another election, SBC messengers elected Florida pastor Ted Traylor as first vice president. Traylor, pastor of Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, defeated fellow Floridian Brad Hoffman, pastor of First Baptist Church of Tusawilla, by a margin of 3,054-892.

Florida Baptist Convention Executive Director John Sullivan nominated Traylor, noting the church's commitment to missions and evangelism. The church baptized 309 people in 1999 and gave \$600,000 to the Cooperative Program, he said.

Hoffman was nominated by Richard Beers, pastor of First Baptist Church in Largo, Fla., who described a ministry sponsored by Hoffman's church called Antioch Affection, which offers support and restoration for fired ministers.

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Patterson emphasizes ambassadorship in annual SBC president's address

By Marv Knox

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists must remain true to their God-given assignment to be ambassadors for Christ, Paige Patterson insisted June 13, during his presidential address to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting.

"Above all else, we are ambassadors for Christ," Patterson proclaimed, citing the Apostle Paul's advice to Christians in the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians.

Patterson concluded his second one-year term as SBC president during the two-day meeting in Orlando, Fla.

Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., said he has been influenced by the notion of Christian ambassadorship since he was 9 years old. The convention's missions program for boys, Royal Ambassadors, "stamped my life forever," he recalled, eventually leading to "my appointment as a heavenly ambassador to an alien world."

The Greek word translated in English Bibles as "ambassador" reflects virtues of nobility and honor, Patterson, a New Testament scholar, described. The word is in a verb form in the passage he cited, translating roughly as "we are ambassadorizing."

"In other words, 'ambassador' is not merely a title of honor but an activity," Patterson said. "The title 'ambassador' identifies both who we are and what we do. Consequently, the behavior of the ambassador ought to be such that neither the credibility of his message nor the reputation of the Sovereign he represents should be diminished by his actions."

Christian ambassadors should be challenged by "three distinct motivations," he said. They are:

-- Inevitable accountability. Every Christian eventually will stand before the "judgment seat" of God to give an account for that person's life and actions, he said.

"Ambassadorship makes us responsible for many things," he added. "For example, we are concerned about worldwide religious liberty, which is appropriately defined as the open marketplace of religious discussion in which everyone is entitled to follow his conscience, even if that means a changing of the mind. In that kind of open marketplace of ideas, Christianity will inevitably triumph."

Religious liberty supports the SBC's right to evangelize non-Christians, even people who adhere to other world religions, he pointed out. Specifically, he cited criticism the convention's International Mission Board has received for "targeting" members of other faith groups for evangelistic outreach.

"We need never apologize for such accountability to our missionary assignment," he stressed.

Similarly, Southern Baptists must support the Christian school movement and its effort to educate children in home schools and faith-based schools, he said. And they must "be discriminating in our entertainment," he added, referencing the convention's 2-year-old boycott of the Walt Disney Co. for what Southern Baptists have described as its failure to maintain consistent family-supportive standards.

Emphasizing the accountability theme, Patterson declared his support for proposed revisions to the "Baptist Faith and Message," the convention's doctrinal statement, which were scheduled for vote later in the meeting.

"For more than 20 years now, you have attended these conventions and voted to return to the faith of our fathers and to be bound only by the authority of Christ and the God-breathed word of our Lord," he said. "Now let us tell the world in a succinct confession those truths most widely believed among us."

-- Incomparable affection. Christians are compelled to their task by the love of Christ, Patterson noted. "Love constrains us as nothing else."

Through the sacrifice of Christ and the forgiveness of human sin, Christians have been compelled to love and serve God, he said. "Whereas human forgiveness has its limits and its inabilities, divine forgiveness is limited only by the man who refuses to accept it. We cannot help but say, 'The love of Christ compels us in a way that can never, ever fail.'"

-- Incredible assignment. "It is as though God is pleading with the world through us, 'Be reconciled to God,'" he reported.

"For that reason, I stand before you today ... and admonish all of us together to devote ourselves as never before to getting the saving gospel of Jesus Christ to all 6 billion people on the face of this globe. This

is the missionary task to which we now must devote ourselves with renewed vigor. ... This missionary task is what the Bible is all about."

Patterson illustrated the importance of Christian ambassadorship through conversations with four actors who portrayed famous Baptist missionaries.

Lottie Moon, a missionary to China who died of starvation in 1912 and for whom the SBC's international missions offering is named, cautioned against the practice of "surrogate missions."

"When will your parents offer their children to God as missionaries rather than just sending their money?" she asked. "Do they ever intend to go themselves to a mission assignment? ... Can I ask you, what is it that you have sacrificed for the lost of the world?"

Adoniram Judson, with his wife, Ann, pioneered Baptist foreign missions in Burma. Ann Judson and their children died on the mission field.

"While I buried so many of my children in Burmese soil, it seems that ... you are not even willing to bury your own selfishness and to give of yourselves and your money and your prayers for the sake of getting the gospel to the world," he said.

"Bury your materialism like I buried my children. Will you sleep less comfortably in order to get the word of God to the nations? Can Jesus count on you to persevere even when the task seems impossible?"

Bill Wallace, a missionary physician to China who died in prison after the Communist revolution, expressed doubt that today's Southern Baptists possess the commitment and courage necessary to proclaim the gospel to the whole world.

"I am certain that you do not have the courage to stay when persecution and difficulty become severe," he said. "And, frankly, even if you do have Baptist missionaries willing to stay and to sacrifice, I especially have my questions about you folks at home."

Bertha Smith, another former missionary to China, emphasized the necessity for depending upon Christ for the completion of the ambassador's task.

"It is not programs but prayer that God honors," she said. "Southern Baptists have a terrible habit of forgetting the words of Jesus, 'without me, you can do nothing. ... Unless our people remain before the throne (of God) in concentrated intercession, you are never going to see great movement of God among Southern Baptists."

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Falwell urges Baptists to help defeat Al Gore

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Baptist churches need to help defeat Al Gore in the November presidential elections by getting involved in voter-registration drives, Jerry Falwell said in a radio interview June 12 during the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Orlando, Fla.

Falwell, who in recent years led his once-independent Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., into the SBC, was interviewed by Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. The interview, conducted in the SBC exhibit hall, was to be broadcast later on the ERLC's nationwide "For Faith and Family" program.

America's religious conservatives are the "most energized" they have been since they helped elect Ronald Reagan president in 1980, Falwell said.

"The American people, I think, sense something right now -- that we are about to lose America," he explained. "Ronald Reagan would not have been president unless Bible-believing Christians in 1979 and 1980 by the millions said, 'We've had enough,' and threw Jimmy Carter out and put Ronald Reagan in, to put it bluntly."

"If we don't do the same thing Nov. 7 with Mr. Gore," Falwell said, "and get somebody in there to rebuild the moral values and fabric of this nation, we're going to be in the same mess or worse than we were in 1980."

Gore, also a Southern Baptist, is expected to be the Democratic candidate in this year's presidential election. He is predicted to be running against Texas Gov. George W. Bush, the likely Republican nominee.

Falwell has come under intense criticism from civil libertarians, who accuse him of endorsing specific candidates and calling for the defeat of certain candidates. U.S. law related to the Internal Revenue Service prohibits tax-exempt organizations such as churches and religious ministries from endorsing specific candidates. Violation of this law could result in loss of tax-exempt status.

Falwell told Land in the radio interview he has launched a seven-month campaign he hopes will result in 10 million new registered voters and "scores of millions more" motivated to participate in the November elections.

People of Faith 2000 aims to engage 200,000 evangelical churches and 28 million "faith-based families," he said. Pastoral registration packets will be mailed to the churches.

Pastors are not asked to promote candidates or parties, Falwell said, but to take advantage of the motor voter registration law. For example, pastors could take time in a Sunday morning service to lead members to fill out voter registration forms, he said. The church could collect the forms and deliver them to the appropriate registrar.

It will require registering 3 million to 4 million more voters than took part in the 1996 elections "to almost guarantee pro-life, conservative, pro-family persons elected to the Congress, to the state legislatures and to the White House," Falwell said.

A member of the audience hearing the broadcast asked Falwell what would happen if Bush selects a pro-abortion running mate. Both Falwell and Land predicted that would not happen.

"I've told the governor that could cost him the election," Falwell said. "The best way to de-energize our people is to bring a pro-choice vice presidential candidate onto the ticket."

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-- By ABP staff

WMU starts new century by installing new leader

By Millie Gill, Lacy Thompson and William Perkins

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Woman's Missionary Union started a new page in its long history June 11 by installing Wanda Lee as seventh executive director of the auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention. The service took place in the opening session of the 112th WMU annual meeting in Orlando, Fla.

Lee, a registered nurse and former Southern Baptist missionary to the Caribbean, previously served as national WMU president since 1996.

In remarks following her installation, Lee dated her call to missions from nursing school 30 years ago. During her time as a missionary, she recalled: "I experienced what I had been learning in WMU. As many of you prayed faithfully when my name was on the prayer calendar and as you gave to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, it was translated into our overseas home and into my assignment as a nurse and my husband's role as a church planter."

"God has kept his promise to use my gifts and abilities in many different ways throughout these past years," Lee said. "My greatest desire has always been to know his heart and his will and have the courage to be obedient."

Lee called her new role the most challenging missions assignment of her life.

Calling the position a sacred trust, Lee said, "It is a trust I do not take lightly, but accept only with the confident assurance that as God has led and been faithful in my life before today, he has committed to do the same for me and WMU in all the days before us.

"Together, may all we do for the cause of missions bring honor and glory to the Lord and him alone."

In her first annual report as WMU executive director June 12, Lee challenged those who question whether WMU is still viable and say there is no time for missions education.

"We are the church of Jesus Christ. We are commissioned and called to carry the light of the gospel to a darkened world," she said. "We must seek new and different ways to challenge the church to make missions once again a high priority."

She also challenged women to recognize and call attention to the tremendous force they can become through the power of prayer.

"Hold fast to him and him alone. Serve the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul," Lee concluded. "When you do, his promise is to bless us and guide us for all the days ahead."

WMU members also elected Janet Hoffman of Farmerville, La., as president and Yolanda Calderon of Modesto, Calif., as recording secretary.

Hoffman, 64, national recording secretary since 1996, was elected to succeed Lee, who became WMU executive director/treasurer March 1. Calderon, California WMU president from 1994 to 1998, replaced Hoffman as recording secretary. Calderon, 58, is the first ethnic leader to be elected as a national WMU officer.

Both officers will be eligible for annual re-election for up to five years.

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SBC Executive Committee hires vice president for news

By Bob Allen

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee has hired a non-journalist to head up its official news service, Baptist Press.

Will Hall II, a 40-year-old retired Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy, was elected unanimously as the convention's vice president for convention news June 12.

He begins work June 15, succeeding 21-year Baptist journalist Herb Hollinger, who retires after nine years in the post July 1.

Hall will be the first person to come to the half-century-old job as the denomination's press representative from a non-journalism background. In a brief statement to the Executive Committee, Hall said after retiring from the Navy, he began to pray for an opportunity to use his "skill set" in a ministry setting.

Hall has written many briefs as a policy analyst and educator while serving in the Pentagon and at the U.S. Naval Academy, said Morris Chapman, the Executive Committee's president and chief executive officer, who will be Hall's boss.

"He does not have formal journalism training," Chapman said, but "he has the gift of writing and the gift of being adaptable to whatever God places in his path."

Chapman said he first met Hall years ago while preaching in Hall's church at the time, First Southern Baptist Church in San Diego, Calif. Chapman said he learned Hall was living in Nashville, Tenn., last fall while in the midst of a search for a new vice president for convention news.

Hall, an ordained minister, said: "I didn't know this job existed. I didn't seek it. I didn't lobby for it."

He said he felt "joy" as he prayed about being considered for the post, but he still had reservations. He "laid out two fleeces," he said, a reference to the Bible story of Gideon, asking that God would confirm his good feelings about the job by answering two unrelated prayers.

The second request, he said, did not come until after the public announcement of his nomination. He said he was prepared to suffer the embarrassment of withdrawing when God confirmed his second "fleece."

Executive Committee chairman Claude Thomas said Hall "has some convictions that are very important to us" regarding the Bible and doctrinal issues.

Hall is a graduate of the Naval Academy with master's degrees from George Washington University and Harvard. He is working toward a doctorate at Vanderbilt University and expects to be finished within a year.

His Navy experience included training helicopter pilots, various leadership posts, working as a strategist for the Joint Chiefs of Staff and teaching and administrative posts at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, Md.

He and his wife, Catherine, have three sons aged 15, 4 and 2.

Along with electing Hall at a pre-Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Orlando, Fla., the Executive Committee passed a resolution of appreciation for Hollinger, a former pastor, who plans to start a mission church in Idaho in retirement.

The resolution says Hollinger "consistently, fairly and effectively presented the truth about Southern Baptists to Southern Baptists." His work "has been marked with such integrity as to leave an admirable legacy," it also says, and "his life and ministry have brought glory and honor to our Lord."

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