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**WRAPUP: SBC moves forward
with conservative agenda**

By Bob Allen

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- A banner inside the sprawling Orange County Convention Center directed pedestrians, "Southern Baptist Convention: Straight Ahead."

As a double-entendre, it could have been the theme for the June 13-14 annual meeting in Orlando, Fla.

Nearly 12,000 messengers reiterated the denomination's strong stance against homosexuality and for traditional family roles, this time amending Southern Baptists' confessional document to reflect new conservative mores.

Choosing their first president in the 21st century, they elected the first baby boomer to hold the post, 47-year-old James Merritt, pastor of the 12,000-member First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga. While pledging to focus on involving younger pastors in leadership and encouraging volunteer missions, Merritt also promised to stay the conservative course set by convention leaders over the last 20 years.

Other amendments to the "Baptist Faith and Message," Southern Baptists' 75-year-old confession of faith, tightened views on the inerrancy of Scripture and limited pastoral-leadership roles to men.

Baptists on both sides said debate crystallized differences that divide moderates and conservatives and culminated the two-decade struggle between the factions.

Convention resolutions carried on a tradition of conservative pronouncements on social issues while forging into new territory, putting the denomination for the first time on record as favoring the death penalty.

As Southern Baptists met in Orlando for the first time since boycotting the Walt Disney Co. two years ago, in part for company policies that benefit homosexuals, gay-rights activists went to jail for blocking access to the convention center in protest of the SBC's view that homosexuality is a sin.

And in response to criticism by Jewish and other faith groups after the SBC singled them out for evangelism, messengers said clearly that they intend to preach the gospel boldly, even when it is unpopular.

In a concession to criticism of the second major rewrite of the "Baptist Faith and Message" since its release in 1925, a blue-ribbon committee named to review the document added terms "soul competency" and "priesthood of the believer" from the document's 1963 version to the new preamble as well.

Messengers overwhelmingly rejected, however, attempts to restore language describing the Bible as "the record" of God's revelation and Jesus Christ as the criterion by which Scripture is understood.

Moderates said those subtle omissions elevate the Bible from an inspired book that points to Christ into an object of worship. Conservatives, meanwhile, said those terms have been misused to undermine the Scripture's authority.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is what it all comes down to. The issue is whether the Bible is the word of God or merely a record of God's word," said Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a leading member of the SBC study committee.

"The Bible is not merely a record," Mohler said, prompting a standing ovation from convention messengers. "It is the revelation of God."

Texas Baptist Executive Director Charles Wade, who offered one of the failed amendments, said later he agreed with Mohler's statement that "this is what it all comes down to."

The question, he said, is "Can you have a high view of the Bible but have a higher view of Jesus?"

"It all comes down to this: The Bible, as high as we hold it as a source for doctrinal understanding, Jesus Christ is the criterion by which we interpret the Bible."

If Jesus is not the guiding principle for biblical interpretation, Wade asked, "then who or what is?"

Another article on Christians and the social order said Baptists should oppose abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality and racism. Committee members said that those who wrote the statement in 1963 could not have conceived of a time when those issues would need to be addressed.

And an article on the church was revised to stipulate that, "While both men and women are gifted and called for ministry, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture."

The new SBC president told reporters the Bible clearly forbids women from serving as senior pastors. While some women may believe they are called to preach, Merritt said, they are misled, because "God is bound by his own word" not to issue a call that is unbiblical.

Some observers said they expect changes in the faith statement to drive moderate churches away. Merritt said, however, that he doesn't foresee a split. "I think the vast majority of Baptists are extremely happy" with the convention's leadership, he said, evidenced by record gifts to the SBC's unified budget, the Cooperative Program.

A resolution for the first time states Southern Baptist support for capital punishment in cases of murder and treasonous acts that result in death. It urges fair implementation of the death penalty and supports the use of advanced DNA testing to determine guilt or innocence.

The SBC resolution declares that God "established capital punishment as a just and appropriate means by which the civil magistrate may punish those guilty of capital crimes."

During a press conference after the vote, Resolutions Committee chairman Hayes Wicker said endorsing capital punishment does not compromise the denomination's traditional pro-life views.

"We feel it is very consistent to be just as much for the victim as the murderer," he said. "We feel like we are pro-life in every sense of the word."

Twenty-three members of Soulforce, a gay-rights organization, were arrested in a peaceful protest of the SBC's anti-homosexual stances.

Soulforce organizer Mel White said the demonstration was seeking acceptance for gay and lesbian Christians by Southern Baptist churches.

"We're looking simply for the Southern Baptists -- and for the other churches -- to say, 'Hey, you're welcome here, too. We're all sinners here at the foot of the cross,'" said White, a former evangelical film producer and ghostwriter for Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell.

Four members of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, who picketed the convention from start to finish, were also arrested for refusing to leave the scene.

Another SBC resolution on "Religious Freedom and Evangelism in a Pluralistic Society" affirms Baptists' "God-given and constitutionally protected right to make Christ known."

The resolution responds to recent criticism of evangelism "targeted" at adherents of other faiths.

In the convention sermon, former SBC president Bailey Smith observed, "The world is upset at Southern Baptists because we're witnessing to them."

"Get used to it," he replied.

"Jesus Christ didn't come to die for Christians," Smith said. "He came to die for the world."

In his address, outgoing president Paige Patterson sounded a similar theme. "We need never apologize for ... accountability to our missionary assignment," he said.

Other officers elected include Ted Traylor, pastor of Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, Fla., as first vice president, and Tommy French, pastor of Jefferson Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, La., as second vice president.

John Yeats of Oklahoma and Lee Porter of Georgia were re-elected, respectively, as recording and registration secretaries.

The convention approved a Cooperative Program budget of just under \$168 million for 2000-2001. The budget supports nearly 10,000 missionaries through the International and North American mission boards, six seminaries, an Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and other ministries.

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Southern Baptists divide over focus of revelation

By Mark Wingfield

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) --The key question is not, "What would Jesus do?" but "What does the Bible say?" Southern Baptists said resoundingly June 14.

After months of speculation about proposed changes to the Southern Baptist Convention's "Baptist Faith and Message" statement, debate on the convention floor focused on the nuanced question of whether Baptists' ultimate authority is Jesus or the Bible.

Convention messengers overwhelmingly approved recommendations of a blue-ribbon study committee appointed by SBC President Paige Patterson, after soundly defeating three attempted amendments.

Leading Baptist moderates and conservatives alike agreed afterward that the debate provided a microcosm of partisan tensions that have torn the nation's largest Protestant denomination apart over the last 20 years. Some viewed the 50-minute debate as the culmination of the battle for the Bible launched in 1979.

From a conservative perspective, Southern Baptists have cemented their conviction that the Bible is the written word of God. For moderates, the SBC has elevated the Bible to an object of worship, rather than an inspired document that points believers to Christ.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is what it all comes down to. The issue is whether the Bible is the word of God or merely a record of God's word," Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary,

said from the platform at one point during the debate. Mohler was a prominent member of the SBC study committee.

He was opposing a motion from the floor by Anthony Sizemore of Floydada, Texas, who attempted to use language in the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" section on Scripture instead of revisions proposed by the study committee.

The 1963 version described the Bible as "the record of God's revelation of himself to man," while the new version says the Bible "is God's revelation of himself to man." Where the 1963 version identified Jesus as "the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted," the new version says, "All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is himself the focus of divine revelation."

"The Bible is not merely a record," Mohler said, prompting a standing ovation from convention messengers. "It is the revelation of God. It is always a triumphant moment when this convention states clearly its belief that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God. ... Pray tell, what do we know of Jesus apart from Scriptures?"

Sizemore and others, however, argued that the changes elevate the Bible above Jesus.

"I believe the Bible is God's word, and I strive to obey the standards it prescribes," Sizemore said. "The Bible is a book we can trust. ... That being said, the Bible is still just a book. Christians are supposed to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, not a book."

Sizemore described the rewording as "a major doctrinal change."

"For one must see that the Bible is a record of what Christ has done," he said. "Christ is the revelation of God. He is not the focus of divine revelation. ... We must be careful not to elevate the written word above the one to whom it points."

David Currie, a member of Southland Baptist Church in San Angelo, Texas, and executive director of Texas Baptists Committed, supported Sizemore's argument.

Currie said he became a Christian as a child because the Holy Spirit convicted him of his sin, even though he knew little of what the Bible said.

"In Galatians, Paul said, 'I want you to know, brothers, this gospel I preach was not something I made up, ... rather I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ,'" Currie said. "I'm glad this committee was not around when Paul received his revelation from Jesus Christ."

Currie's comment drew a sharp retort from Richard Land, president of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and a member of the SBC study committee.

"The Apostle Paul was an apostle," Land said. "The illumination we get from the Holy Spirit must be guided by Scripture, because you and I are not apostles, sir."

Messengers soundly rejected Sizemore's amendment, just as they had an earlier amendment proposed by Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Wade suggested restoring two paragraphs from the preamble to the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message."

Before debate, the study committee introduced an additional two sentences to the statement's preamble inserting the words "soul competency" and "priesthood of believers" but noting that these liberties should be tempered by "our accountability to each other under the word of God."

Wade proposed going a step further toward the 1963 preamble by reinserting these sentences: "Baptists are a people who profess a living faith. This faith is rooted and grounded in Jesus Christ who is the 'same yesterday and today and forever.' Therefore, the sole authority for faith and practice among Baptists is Jesus Christ, whose will is revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

"A living faith must experience a growing understanding of truth and must be continually interpreted and related to the needs of each new generation. Throughout their history, Baptist bodies both large and small have issued statements of faith, which comprise a consensus of their beliefs. Such statements have never been regarded as complete, infallible statements of faith, nor as official creeds carrying mandatory authority."

Wade said his amendment was "crucial" to affirming the supremacy of Christ. "We are indeed people of the book, but we are also people who bow only before Jesus Christ our Savior."

The amendment also was needed to prevent the "Baptist Faith and Message" from being used as a creed, which Baptists have always opposed, Wade argued.

The study committee's proposed new preamble replaced the 1963 language with this statement: "Baptist churches, associations and general bodies have adopted confessions of faith as a witness to the world and as instruments of doctrinal accountability."

Members of the SBC study committee strongly urged messengers to reject Wade's amendment.

"All of us believe in the lordship of Jesus Christ," Land explained. "But we believe the only Jesus Christ we can know is the Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture."

"I fully believe that a demonic spirit could come and sit on the foot of my bed tonight and say, 'Richard, I am Jesus. I want to tell you everybody is going to heaven and you don't have to worry about it any more. But that would be wrong. ... Why? Because Scripture stands in judgment of my experience, not my experience in judgment of Scripture.'"

Wade's amendment was supported by Bruce Prescott, a member of First Baptist Church of Norman, Okla., and director of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists.

"There is a difference in the way we understand soul competency in the old 'Baptist Faith and Message' and the new version that is being proposed," he said. "Soul competency as defined by E.Y. Mullins and Herschel Hobbs was soul competency under God. That means we are responsible to Jesus Christ. Soul competency as defined by this committee ... is soul competency under the church. That means we are accountable to each other's interpretations of the word of God."

"We really need to leave us free to be accountable to Jesus Christ," Prescott said. "He is the criterion by which the Bible is interpreted. He is the only infallible and inerrant interpreter of Scripture."

Messengers also rejected a third amendment, offered by Jim Goodroe of First Baptist Church of Sumter, S.C., to amend a statement that he said endorsed "closed communion."

In interviews afterward, both Wade and study committee members characterized the floor debate as illustrative of the differences between SBC moderates and conservatives.

Wade said he agreed with Mohler's statement that "this is what it all comes down to."

The question, he said, is "Can you have a high view of the Bible but have a higher view of Jesus?"

"It all comes down to this: The Bible, as high as we hold it as a source for doctrinal understanding, Jesus Christ is the criterion by which we interpret the Bible."

If Jesus is not the guiding principle for biblical interpretation, Wade asked, "then who or what is?"

That question was put to four members of the study committee during a news conference minutes later. Mohler spoke for the committee to explain there were "dangers" in the language identifying Jesus as the criterion for biblical interpretation.

"We do believe in a christological hermeneutic" or framework for biblical interpretation, he said. However, "the danger is when Christ is set against Scripture," he added.

Making Jesus the criterion by which the Bible is interpreted allows anyone to assert anything and claim Jesus told them that was truth, he suggested.

Others opposed to the committee's recommendations refuted that notion, claiming the words of Jesus in the New Testament, for example, take precedence when conflicting passages are found in the Old Testament.

The Bible is not a "flat" document, argued Wayne Ward, emeritus professor of theology at Southern Seminary during a speech on the convention floor.

"You could follow Moses and stone adulterers," he said. "It would clear out Congress and empty some pulpits," but it would not be true to words of Jesus in the New Testament.

"The Bible is Scripture, God's written word, yes, but it does not say anywhere believe on the Bible and thou shalt be saved," Ward said. "We have to decide whether we're going to stop in the Old Testament with Moses or whether we're going to go on and interpret Moses by Jesus."

Chuck Kelley, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and a member of the SBC study committee, said in the news conference that this debate formed a "magnificent textbook illustration of why we had a denominational struggle."

"If anyone had any doubt about whether a new stream of theology began entering our denomination in the '60s," listening to the floor debate about the relative merits of Jesus versus the Bible should have dispelled those doubts, he said.

Mohler agreed: "There are two different visions of Baptist life and the Baptist faith."

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Resolutions affirm capital punishment, oppose threat of 'New Age globalism'

By Trennis Henderson

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Adopting a pro-capital punishment statement for the first time in Southern Baptist Convention history, messengers approved a resolution describing the practice as "a legitimate form of punishment for those guilty of murder or treasonous acts that result in death."

The capital punishment resolution was one of only two resolutions that generated debate among messengers. A proposal focusing on the threat of "New Age globalism" was amended twice before gaining final approval.

Messengers adopted a total of 10 resolutions June 14 during the SBC annual meeting in Orlando. The statements addressed such diverse issues as religious persecution in Sudan and China, sex trafficking and the 75th anniversary of the SBC's Cooperative Program unified giving plan.

The resolution affirming capital punishment comes amid growing public debate and media coverage of efforts in several states to re-evaluate and perhaps revamp current capital punishment guidelines. Those studies have been prompted by advances in DNA testing and other technology that can aid criminal investigations.

The SBC resolution declares that God "established capital punishment as a just and appropriate means by which the civil magistrate may punish those guilty of capital crimes."

Urging that capital punishment "be administered only when the pursuit of truth and justice result in clear and overwhelming evidence of guilt," the resolution calls for the death penalty to be carried out "as justly and as fairly as possible without undue delay, without reference to the race, class or status of the guilty."

David Crosby of New Orleans encouraged messengers to defeat the resolution, invoking the name of Karla Faye Tucker, a murderer who reportedly repented of her crime and became a Christian before she was executed.

Noting that Jesus was executed "under an unjust system," Crosby said, "I wonder why the church of Jesus Christ wants to stand up and favor capital punishment. There are better ways we can witness to the testimony of Christ than this."

Resolutions Committee chairman Hayes Wicker responded: "It was with tremendous struggle and agony of thought and prayer that we dealt with this resolution. We believe there must be great pains taken in the entire process" of carrying out a capital sentence."

Emphasizing, however, "God's word has spoken clearly on the issue of capital punishment," Wicker told messengers, "We believe it is time to speak since the world is saying so much about it."

Greg Titus, a messenger from Lafayette, Ga., countered: "The Bible teaches that every human life has sacred value. We are a people who value life and we should vote against this."

"We are saved from the penalty of sin but not from the consequences of sin," responded Lee Taylor of Parrish, Ala. "When people commit crimes, punishment must follow or we will live in a society that does not follow the commands of Jesus Christ."

Messengers voted overwhelmingly to approve the resolution.

During a press conference after the vote, Wicker said endorsing capital punishment does not compromise the denomination's traditional pro-life views.

"We feel it is very consistent to be just as much for the victim as the murderer," he said. "We feel like we are pro-life in every sense of the word."

"We have been very clear and precise in our wording," he added. "Everything we stand for is based on the infallible Word of God."

A resolution decrying "the threat of New Age globalism" expresses concern about promotion of "a one-world government, a one-world religion and a one-world economy." It warns that the success of such a movement "would mean the destruction of the sovereignty of nations."

Calling for Christians to "demonstrate love for country by praying and standing for national sovereignty," the resolution also urges Congress and other national leaders to guard U.S. national sovereignty, prevent the placement of American troops under foreign military command and reverse the trend toward globalism.

The resolution opposing religious persecution in Sudan and the People's Republic of China cites last month's report of the Commission on International Religious Freedom. The report calls Sudan "the world's most violent abuser" of religious freedom, with more than 2 million people killed in a 17-year genocidal war.

The resolution notes that the Chinese government's suppression of religious freedom violates both the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Urging prayer and relief aid, the resolution also calls on Congress "to use every appropriate means to compel the governments in Sudan and the People's Republic of China to stop the various atrocities and ongoing violations of religious freedom."

Wicker told reporters the committee opted to "use a rifle approach rather than a shotgun" by focusing specifically on Sudan and China. He described the two countries as the "most visible, most well-known and perhaps worst offenders" of religious freedom.

Condemning "the trafficking of women and children for sexual purposes," a resolution on that subject reports that "as many as one million women and two million children are trafficked internationally into sexual slavery annually," including more than 50,000 women and children in the United States.

The resolution urges prayer "for the victims of this horrendous crime." It also calls on Congress to pass legislation increasing criminal penalties, providing assistance for victims and urging worldwide action "to eliminate this particularly vile form of human trafficking."

Declaring opposition to trafficking of human fetal tissue, messengers agreed that "the growing industry of buying and selling human fetal organs, tissues and cells represents a grisly practice that converts human body parts into a commodity to be bought and sold in the marketplace."

The resolution describes elective abortion as "an act of violence against unborn human beings." It adds that, "The sale of their tissues is an assault on the biblical truth that all human beings are created in the image of God."

Other resolutions adopted without debate include:

-- The Cooperative Program's 75th anniversary. It urges Southern Baptist churches to consider increasing their church budget giving to the CP by 1 percent during the anniversary year.

-- Religious freedom and evangelism in a pluralistic society. Affirming "our God-given and constitutionally protected right to make Christ known in a pluralistic society," the resolution adds, "We abhor the use of coercive techniques, dishonest appeals or any form of deception in evangelistic outreach."

-- "Judicial oppression" of the Boy Scouts of America. Responding to a recent New Jersey Supreme Court ruling upholding a homosexual's right to serve as a Scout leader, the resolution warns that such "judicial imperialism," if allowed to stand, could subject churches and other religious institutions to "an overweening government intrusion into their right of self-governance."

-- Retaining the traditional method of calendar dating. Affirming the historic calendar designations of B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. ("anno Domini" -- in the year of the Lord), the statement opposes the designations of B.C.E. (before common era) and C.E. (common era) as examples of "secularization, anti-supernaturalism, religious pluralism and political correctness pervasive in our society."

-- Appreciation. The traditional resolution expresses thanks to the host city, Florida Baptists and denominational leaders for work related to the SBC annual meeting.

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SBC declines reconciliation effort, refers other motions to trustees

By Bob Allen

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists declined to establish a committee aimed at healing fissures between conservatives and moderates in Baptist state conventions.

Messengers to the June 13-14 Southern Baptist Convention in Orlando, Fla., voted down a motion from the floor to form a committee to work toward "reconciliation and restoration" among various factions in the denomination.

The motion, proposed by Paddy O'Connor, pastor of First Baptist Church in Brooksville, Fla., asked the SBC president, in consultation with state leaders, to appoint a committee aimed at bringing together various "subgroups" in Baptist life.

Issues including the "inerrancy" of Scripture that divided the SBC in the 1980s now have trickled down in some cases to state conventions. Several state SBC affiliates have competing moderate and conservative political organizations vying for control. Conservatives have formed separate conventions in two moderate strongholds, Virginia and Texas.

O'Connor argued in bringing his motion that such division does not honor God. Messengers overwhelmingly voted the motion down, however, after SBC leaders argued against such a committee.

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, said a committee is not needed, because fellowship issues such as doctrinal views were decided at the national level by the SBC Peace Committee 10 years ago.

T.C. Pinckney, leader of a conservative state group in Virginia, said denominational leaders should not negotiate with others who don't share their theology.

"The Southern Baptist tent should be just as broad as God's word -- no broader, no narrower," Pinckney said. "Scripture, not cooperation is primary. Let every Southern Baptist accept God's word, and cooperation will follow as day follows night."

The convention approved another messenger's motion, however, instructing the SBC president to write a letter to radio personality Dr. Laura Schlessinger commending her "courageous stand" against homosexuality. Schlessinger, who is Jewish, has done much to promote "Judeo-Christian" principles, said Wiley Drake of California, who made the motion.

Several other motions at the convention were, in accordance with SBC bylaws, referred to various convention entities for consideration. Those agencies will report on their disposition at next summer's annual convention in New Orleans, La.

Referred motions include:

-- Restricting solicitation of non-Cooperative Program funds from local churches, studying the use of CP funds in joint efforts with groups whose beliefs conflict with the witness of Southern Baptists and scheduling the 2005 meeting in Cleveland, to the SBC Executive Committee.

-- Endorsing ministries to homosexuals and requesting the PowerLine radio program stop using secular music, to the North American Mission Board.

-- Evaluating whether all materials sold at LifeWay Christian Stores are appropriate, to LifeWay Christian Resources, the SBC publishing arm.

-- Revising missionary appointment policies regarding divorced persons, to both SBC missions agencies.

-- Requesting that denominational employees not be required to sign the "Baptist Faith and Message," to all SBC entities.

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Police arrest gay activists in protest outside SBC

By David Winfrey and Tim Palmer

ORLANDO, Fla. (ABP) -- Twenty-seven people were arrested June 14 outside the meeting hall for the Southern Baptist Convention while protesting Southern Baptists' characterization of homosexual activity as a sin.

This was the second demonstration this year by Soulforce outside a denomination's national meeting. A month earlier, 191 Soulforce demonstrators were arrested in Cleveland at the United Methodist Church's general conference.

In an event as peaceful as it was choreographed, about the only unexpected action came when four members of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals were also arrested for failing to leave the area during protest.

Soulforce organizer Mel White said the demonstration was seeking acceptance for gay and lesbian Christians by Southern Baptist churches.

"We're looking simply for the Southern Baptists -- and for the other churches -- to say, 'Hey, you're welcome here, too. We're all sinners here at the foot of the cross,'" said White, a former evangelical film producer and ghostwriter for Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell.

"They say, 'We're sinners, but we're saved. You're sinners, and you won't get saved until you get your sexual orientation changed,'" White said.

At about the same time as the arrests, Southern Baptists were approving changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message" doctrinal statement, which included adding homosexuality to a list of sins Christians should oppose.

Before that morning's business session, members of some gay-rehabilitation organizations passed out statements of thanks to Southern Baptists for their stand. "Southern Baptists are giving increased attention to a redemptive message concerning homosexuality," said a printed statement from Bertie Barber, director of Eleutherus, Inc., in Winter Park, Fla.

But demonstrator Richard Murphy from Miami, said Soulforce speaks for all the "closeted" Southern Baptists who he said suffer because of the denomination's stance on homosexuality. "I don't believe my Jesus Christ sacrificed his life for that situation."

In an event coordinated with the Orange County Sheriff's Office, more than 50 members of Soulforce held a silent vigil at 9 a.m. June 14 across the street from the Orange County Convention Center. At 9:25 a.m., about half the group marched into an open plaza singing and humming hymns, where they were ordered to disband by a member of the county sheriff's office. The group replied by singing "We Shall Overcome."

White said the group originally had 200 volunteers to demonstrate, but a fear of high fines and a possible jail sentence of 60 days caused them to plan for only 25 arrests. "It's just too steep for people who are not trained and experienced," he said.

When the group didn't disband, sheriff's deputies moved in, taking away demonstrators, placing plastic tie-wrap handcuffs on them and putting them in a van.

As the demonstrators were being arrested, a sheriff's office sergeant motioned for officers also to arrest four demonstrators for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. The group had been demonstrating at the site throughout the convention. PETA leader Bruce Friedrich said his group, complete with one man in a chicken suit and another dressed as a "vegetarian Jesus," had permission to be there.

Sgt. Tim Cannon with the sheriff's office countered that they were warned three times to leave before they were arrested.

Demonstrators were taken to a preliminary booking site set up at the convention center. Bond was set at \$500, according to Jim Sullivan, a spokesman for the Orange County Sheriff's Office.

By that afternoon, at least five demonstrators already were bonded out of jail, while some of the others had said they would wait in jail for an initial appearance before a judge at 2 p.m. the next day, according to Alan Moore, spokesman for the Orange County Corrections Department.

Later in the day after the demonstrations and arrests, representatives of four "ex-gay ministries" held a press conference at the convention to praise Southern Baptists for calling homosexuality sinful.

"Our desire is not to engender hatred of homosexuals," said Tim Wilkins, executive director of Cross Ministry Inc. in Raleigh, N.C. "We love homosexuals precisely because many of us were homosexual. Somewhere a gay would say to me, 'Tim if you really loved me, you would accept me as I am.' And I would respond that my understanding of Christian love, the highest form of love, does not withhold the truth."

The groups sought to counter White's message that when Baptists and others call homosexuality sin they contribute to physical persecution of gays and lesbians. "At the heart of almost all of the violence against us is the spiritual violence of saying God doesn't love us as we are."

Barber said that while she and others make no apology for "standing on and for God's truth, we confess that we have not always stood as zealously on and for God's love."

Wilkins, a former homosexual who now is married and has a baby daughter, said while he recognizes that homosexuals struggle with their desires, that does not change God's command or the hope of change. He compared it to the thousands of people each year who go on diets

"Some of them lose weight. Some of them gain it back. We have to ask the question, did the diet fail? Does the weight-loss program fail or is it the failure of the client to do what it takes? I think it's the latter.

White has said that after 30 years of various "reparative therapies" he believed God wanted him to accept his homosexuality as a gift from God.

Wilkins countered: "The Bible never makes the claim that we are exempt from temptation in this life."

"I'm sorry that he has decided after 30 years to accept his homosexuality. The man who is tempted to break his marriage vows may be tempted, more than likely, for the rest of his life to do it. Whether or not he does it is another thing," he said. "I am not saying that healing is a quick fix. It is not. It's living day by day. It's a relentless reliance on Jesus Christ."

Before his arrest, White noted that whether he's right or wrong, he trusts his salvation ultimately to Christ.

"If we're wrong, if we should have struggled longer against our sexual orientation, if we should have stayed in therapy for the rest of our lives, when the final judgment comes it's what Christ does for us that redeems us. It's not what we do," he said. "We're trusting, just like the Southern Baptists are trusting, that his grace will cover our sins too."

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Evangelical gay-rights leader asks Southern Baptists to 'listen'

By David Winfrey

ORLANDO (ABP) -- Twenty-four hours before he expected to be arrested for protesting Southern Baptists' condemnation of homosexuality, demonstration coordinator Mel White already considered his effort a success.

"Gandhi and King say that when you do justice it's for your own spiritual renewal," White said, "and, by the way, for the transformation of society."

White is director of Soulforce, a group that urges religious bodies to accept homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle. The organization is staging at least five demonstrations this year at denominational meetings.

By urging Southern Baptists to accept homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle, White said, demonstrators already have been successful in their own personal renewal.

In addition, Soulforce's Web site has attracted more than 26,000 visits since it announced the group's plan to demonstrate in Orlando. "We're a huge success. The Internet has already made us that."

While many mainline denominations have debated acceptance of homosexuality and ordination of gay clergy, most Southern Baptists from both camps of moderates and conservatives agree that homosexual behavior is sinful.

During their annual meeting in Orlando, Southern Baptists voted changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message" statement that specifies homosexuality is a sin.

Yet White insists the issue is far from settled among many Southern Baptists.

"The Baptists have quit the debate. We're trying to get it started again," said White, 60. "When we put the word out that we were coming, ... my e-mail went into overload from Southern Baptists all over the country saying, 'Thank you.'"

Far from being a liberal universalist in matters of faith, White calls himself an "evangelical ecumaniac."

"I'm so evangelical, you would be bored to tears by my testimony, you would have heard it so many times. ... I believe in winning people to Christ," he said. "I'm a pastor who happens to be gay, a Christian who happens to be gay. I love Christ with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. I believe that we're totally dependent on the Holy Spirit for where we go and what we say and what we do."

A former ghostwriter for such conservatives as Pat Robertson, Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, White said he revealed to the general public in 1993 that he was homosexual. In 1994 he published "Stranger at the Gate," a book about his struggle with being gay.

White said he underwent 35 years of "psychological trauma" in an attempt to overcome his homosexual orientation. After fasting, exorcism and electric-shock therapy were unsuccessful, he said, he attempted suicide. Finally, he said, he accepted being gay, and ended his marriage of 23 years with the blessing of his wife.

For 16 years he has been in a "committed relationship" with a homosexual partner, Gary Nixon. Together they work as activists leading Soulforce, "seeking justice for God's lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered children," according to the organization's Web site.

Recently, 191 Soulforce activists were arrested in Cleveland outside the convention center for the national conference of the United Methodist Church. Later this year they also will protest outside national meetings of Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Catholics.

"We never go inside. We never threaten anybody. We find a little corner and do our shtick," White said, attempting to overcome concerns that demonstrators will disrupt the SBC business meeting.

"We're simply here to say, 'Please look at the science. Please look at the history. Please look at your own pastoral experiences with gay people. Please look at the gay and lesbian people you know. Please look at the facts and quit taking these six little passages out of context.'"

Ironically, White said he doesn't see himself as a "gay activist," assigning that term to those who are more combative or disruptive.

"What I do is go to religious conventions and beg people to listen," he said. "I look at Christian tradition, I look at biblical evidence and I look at the personhood of Christ and the life and teachings of Jesus to guide me. And when I put that together, I've had to say this is something that Jesus would do. He was for the outcasts from the beginning. ... This is the generation of gay and lesbian outcasts."

White claims his evangelical critics are both sincere and wrong.

"I know that they are as sincere as God's little green acre, but I know Jerry (Falwell) and (retired First Baptist Church of Dallas Pastor W.A.) Criswell were both wrong about (not) letting blacks into their churches 50 years ago," White said. "I know they were wrong about misusing the Scriptures against African-Americans, and I know they're wrong now."

White commented on Scripture passages often used to condemn homosexuality. He said Southern Baptists are being selective literalists in regard to Old Testament passages in Leviticus. White added that such passages are not meant to apply to the new covenant Jesus established.

"The Levitical passage says that if a child sasses his parents, he's an abomination and should be killed," he said. "If the Southern Baptists are serious about Old Testament teachings, they better be serious about it all, or let what they have learned teach them."

In the New Testament, White said the first chapter of the book of Romans, a passage often interpreted to condemn homosexuality, is taken out of context.

"Romans itself is a clear sequence when you read it. It said that the people abandoned God and took on vile behaviors. ... Because they had deserted God and taken on these vile practices, God had to walk away and abandon them. Have I abandoned God? ... Has God abandoned me?" he asked.

While White says his group already has been successful, he nevertheless characterized Southern Baptists' vote regarding homosexuality as a spiritual life-or-death issue on the denomination.

"The Bible is clear that the Spirit of Christ cannot remain where all God's children are not welcome, that the Spirit is with the outcast. And the Southern Baptist church is making outcasts of her gay and lesbian children," he said. "As soon as they kick us out, I believe with all my heart that the Spirit goes with it and that the Southern Baptist church now is fighting for its own soul's sake."

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