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Arkansas Baptists adopt 'Baptist Faith and Message'

By Charlie Warren

CABOT, Ark. (ABP) -- Arkansas Baptists voted for a second straight year to adopt the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" as their state convention's doctrinal guide.

By a 75 percent vote, messengers to this year's Arkansas Baptist State Convention chose to add the faith statement to their articles of incorporation. That is a higher percentage than the 70 percent supporting the change in a first reading last year. Constitutional amendments must pass by at least a two-thirds majority at consecutive annual meetings.

No one responded when convention president Jim Lagrone called for debate on the amendment. After the vote, Lagrone, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church of Bryant, called the 283 messengers who voted in opposition his friends.

"You were my friends before you voted and you are still my friends after you voted," said Lagrone, a conservative who when elected last year pledged to work to unify the state's Baptists.

Some have criticized changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message" adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 2000 as excluding moderates by imposing conservative views. Defenders say the current version more clearly states bedrock convictions by removing language inserted into the 1963 document to accommodate more liberal interpretations.

Lagrone said he visited with several moderate leaders during the past year who told him "all they wanted was a seat at the Baptist table" in Arkansas. "I have not ever pushed them away from that table," he said. "They are a part of us. ... We came to this place praying that we would be one and I'm praying that when we leave this place, we will be one."

Lagrone said he longed for a day when Arkansas Baptists would come into their annual gathering without "wanting to be a winner or a loser."

Lagrone was unopposed for re-election as president at the Oct. 29-30 convention at First Baptist Church in Cabot. Retired convention employee Clarence Shell nominated Lagrone, saying he "stands for his convictions but has compassion for those who don't always agree with him." The convention's first and second vice presidents also won second terms unopposed.

Messengers also adopted a \$19.5 million budget, including \$8.1 million to be forwarded to the Southern Baptist Convention, and extended a missions partnership with San Paulo, Brazil, for three years.

Missouri Baptists refuse to drop legal action

By Vicki Brown

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. (ABP) -- Messengers to the Missouri Baptist Convention rejected by about a 2-to-1 majority a motion to drop legal action against five convention agencies.

In other business at the Oct. 28-30 annual meeting in Springfield, a divided convention also voted to release for other use money initially earmarked for the five entities but held in escrow after they changed charters so that the convention no longer had sole power to name their trustees.

Brian Kaylor of Union Mound Baptist Church offered the motion to instruct convention leaders to drop their motion for declaratory judgment filed earlier this year against The Baptist Home, the Missouri Baptist Foundation, Missouri Baptist University, Windermere Baptist Conference Center and Word and Way.

"It's time to focus on what really matters -- the kingdom," Kaylor argued. "It's time to start loving them instead of suing them."

Missouri Baptist leaders took the five agencies to court to ask a judge to resolve a dispute about whether the various trustee boards had the legal right to amend their charters without convention approval. Previously, the state convention had the power to elect the agencies' trustees.

Kenny Qualls, newly elected president of the MBC, said the convention is "heartbroken" about the dispute but must remain "steadfast" in efforts to restore the institutions to their former relationship.

Dropping the lawsuit, Qualls said, "would set a precedent not only for Missouri, but for the rest of the nation."

Ron Bracy of Salem Baptist Church in Florissant said Baptists ought to resolve their differences not "with the ways of the world," but by Scripture.

Paul Callahan of First Baptist Church in Marshall countered that he believed the convention had already followed biblical steps to restore fellowship without success. Callahan said when a believer refuses to turn from wrongdoing, the Bible directs the church "to treat them as though they are heathens."

"I think that's the way they must be treated," he said.

Convention president Bob Curtis told messengers a judge will hear motions to dismiss the legal action on Nov. 19 in Jefferson City. He urged messengers to set aside that date as a day of prayer "for God's wisdom to be manifest."

By all accounts, this year's convention was more harmonious than last year's meeting in Cape Girardeau, where messengers authorized leaders to sue the renegade agencies and unseated messengers from a historic church for voting to sever ties with the Southern Baptist Convention.

This year's convention featured unanimous votes on elections for officers and little discussion on most business items.

But messengers were divided on a recommendation to redirect more than \$1.3 million escrowed last year from the five agencies to other ministries. Approving a motion from the MBC executive board, messengers voted to release \$750,000 to fund the Rheubin L. South Missouri Missions Offering for 2003; \$100,000 each for the Missouri Baptist Children's Home, Southwest Baptist University, Hannibal LaGrange College and William Jewell College; and \$200,000 to be used for church planting.

During discussion on the convention floor, Cardis Bryan of First Baptist Church in Steelville, said he understood the intent of last year's convention was to hold the money in escrow until the five institutions returned to their former relationship.

Convention officials noted, however, that last year's motion to escrow funds stated "until they [the institutions] come back or by further action of the convention."

During an executive board meeting held prior to the convention, Jay Scribner, chairman of the administrative committee, said convention leaders "needed to be proactive in dealing with the question of the escrowed money."

"It is wise for us as an executive board to come to the convention with a recommendation," Scribner said.

During discussion of the motion on the convention floor, Bracy said the churches that gave the funds in the first place, believing they were going to the five entities and nowhere else, ought to be the ones to decide how to reallocate them.

In other action, the Missouri convention voted to establish four positions for The Pathway, the convention's new official journal. Started earlier this year as an Internet-based publication, the news journal will be printed as a four-color biweekly beginning in January. Its staff will include an editor, managing editor, reporter and lead ministry assistant.

In a related move, the convention dropped a reference in its bylaws to Word and Way, a 107-year-old newspaper and one of the five agencies to recently move to a self-perpetuating board of trustees. The amended bylaw refers instead to the "official news journal of the Missouri Baptist Convention."

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