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News Analysis

Peace, Harmony Reign At State Conventions; Contrast With SBC

by Jim Newton  
For the Baptist Press

A spirit of peace, harmony, and an unusual lack of controversy characterized the general tone of the 30 Baptist state conventions meeting for annual session during a four-week period in late October and November.

Over and over, editors of Baptist state papers and Baptist Press correspondents described their convention meetings as "one of the best conventions ever--there was no controversy," as they filed news reports through Baptist Press.

Some contrasted the harmonious, peaceful spirit of most state conventions with the way numerous state Baptist paper editors characterized the spirit of the Southern Baptist Convention meeting last June in Denver, which some describe as "bitter, hostile, vitriolic, and unforgiving."

Whether the spirit of the state conventions, however, is an indication that the denomination has turned the corner on doctrinal polarization and differences is too early to tell. Much will depend on what happens at the national convention in St. Louis, next June.

In contrast to previous years when federal aid to education has been a dominant theme in the state meetings, the conventions this year were surprisingly void of controversial issues, with a few exceptions.

The issue which seemed to crop up most frequently seemed to be the question of "alien immersion," the financial crunch some states are feeling, resolutions on pornography, drug abuse and alcohol, the traditional Baptist concern for separation of church and state, and support, or lack of it, for Baptist colleges and hospitals.

In four states, the controversial question of whether to seat messengers from churches which practice "alien immersion" or "open communion" came up, but was resolved only in California, and not clearly resolved there.

California Baptists rejected two constitutional amendments submitted last year which would have stricken current limitations against seating convention messengers from churches that practice alien immersion and open communion.

The convention left the matter unresolved, however, when it adopted a report of a committee to define these two terms, but questioned what the committee meant when it said alien immersion is "baptism administered by any church other than churches of like faith and order." It rejected a proposal for a committee to define the phrase "churches of like faith and order."

In sessions described as "remarkably harmonious," the Arkansas Convention, plagued in recent years by a controversy stirred when four churches were ousted because of their doctrinal practices, continued its committee study of resolving the doctrinal differences, and adopted the 1963 Southern Baptist Convention's "Statement of Baptist Faith and Message" as a doctrinal basis for its study.

In South Carolina, two constitutional amendments were introduced for vote and discussion next year which would seek to prohibit churches that accept members baptized by some other means than immersion from being represented at the state convention. The motion was obviously aimed at First Baptist Church, Greenwood, S.C., which only one month earlier was narrowly ousted by the Abbeville Baptist Association because of its alien immersion policies.

And in Alabama, where there is no known Southern Baptist church that practices alien immersion, a committee was asked to study the issue and report later.

About a dozen conventions took actions indicating that they were feeling the financial crunch that comes with big yearly budget increases without equal increases in giving. Eight conventions increased their budgets only slightly. Two approved budget decreases, and two adopted the same budgets they had last year in order to catch up.

The New Mexico convention did not adopt a budget, but asked its State Mission Board to draft a budget in January after the convention approved what some called a "drastic reorganization" that includes elimination of about half-dozen staff members.

In making the reorganization recommendation, a study committee pointed out that during the past 10 years, the convention's budgets have exceeded income by \$458,634, and that so far during 1970, the New Mexico convention is about \$30,000 short of its budget.

Two conventions--Kansas and District of Columbia--approved budget decreases. Kansas is in the midst of a campaign to solve the financial insolvency of its Church Loan Association, and there was a spirit of optimism despite the \$12,000 budget cut which is rather complicated, and some consider an increase rather than decrease. The \$71,000 decrease in the District of Columbia budget was prompted when the convention fell about \$91,000 short of its 1970 goal.

Tennessee and Virginia Baptists voted to keep their total budgets for 1971 at the same level as 1970 budgets, and Maryland Baptists increased their budget by \$22,000 even though they anticipated deficit financing in 1971. Michigan also raised its goal by about \$70,000, although the churches are giving about \$35,000 less than the budget this year, mostly because of the auto strikes there.

Despite the financial crunch, there was apparently no spirit of pessimism in the conventions; but rather a realistic tightening of belts, many of the state correspondents indicated.

Two state conventions, Louisiana and Mississippi, increases slightly the percentage of their budgets going to Southern Baptist Convention world mission causes, and Virginia Baptists defeated by a slim seven-vote margin a committee recommendation to cut two per cent from the portion they previously had been allocating to SBC world mission causes. The narrow Virginia vote kept the allocation at 38 per cent to SBC causes.

Virginia Baptists also adopted a compromise motion instead of an effort to eliminate the budget's \$247,500 allocation to the University of Richmond because of the Baptist school's policy allowing drinking on campus. The compromise will allow churches that don't like the university's policy to stipulate that their funds will not go to the school, and still be able to count the gifts as Cooperative Program contributions rather than designated gifts.

In another controversy involving policies at Baptist schools, Tennessee Baptists requested Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn., to rescind their policy permitting dancing on the campus. The censure of Carson-Newman came as a substitute for a compromise submitted by the Executive Board, suggesting that a committee study the "social needs" at Carson-Newman and report back next year.

Meanwhile, the Florida Baptist Convention completely reversed its last year's disapproval of Stetson University of overwhelmingly adopting a committee recommendation that it continue its current relationship with Stetson. Last year, the convention defeated by only five votes a motion to cut Stetson's \$300,000 allocation from the budget.

In Texas, messengers to the state convention calmly voted to release Baylor University College of Dentistry in Dallas to its own board of trustees, primarily because of the expense in operating the school and convention restrictions against government aid. The Texas convention also asked a committee to look into ways to help the University of Corpus Christi return \$500,000 it borrowed from the Small Business Administration to help rebuild after Hurricane Celia.

Two state conventions voted to divest themselves of hospitals. In Arizona, a year-long controversy apparently was ended with a vote to "release" ownership of three hospitals to their boards of trustees, provided the boards pay the convention \$500,000 in "settlement" of legal and court actions to decide ownership of the hospitals.

And in Louisiana, for the second straight year, the messengers voted to release one of its hospitals--Baptist Hospital in Alexandria, La.,--so that the hospital could accept federal aid.

Only one state--California--adopted specific policies regarding federal aid to its institutions. Adopting a committee study on the policy, the convention ruled out government grants and low-interest loans, but approved a "long-term government loans at a going interest rate" and grants and loans to individual students.

In Arkansas, the president of Southern Baptist College, Walnut Ridge, issued a plea for Baptist colleges to accept state aid aimed at equalizing tuition costs at state and private schools, but no action was taken.

Several other state conventions, however, strongly opposed the "tuition voucher" concept on the public and parochial elementary school level. Missouri, Illinois, Michigan, Louisiana, Texas and Colorado Baptists adopted resolutions opposing aid to parochial schools in their states.

The neighboring states of Virginia and North Carolina adopted resolutions giving opposite views regarding prayer in public schools, and so-called "prayer amendments" to the constitution. Most Southern Baptist state conventions have repeatedly opposed such amendments, as Virginia Baptists did this year; but North Carolina barely adopted a resolution criticizing the U.S. Supreme Court for its ruling against prayer in public schools.

A half-dozen or more conventions adopted resolutions critical of President Richard M. Nixon for appointing a personal representative to the Vatican, but District of Columbia Baptists tabled such a resolution after one messenger said it was poorly worded and contradicted itself.

Almost a dozen conventions, however, told the President they appreciated his stand in rejecting the report of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. Arkansas Baptists called the report "irresponsible, misleading and in tragic error."

In four different states, concern was expressed over strained relationships between pastors and churches, how to get pastor-less churches and church-less pastors together, and the problems of inadequate salaries for church staff people.

Both Georgia and South Carolina Baptists voted to create an office in the state convention headquarters to provide information for churches seeking pastors, and pastors seeking churches. Both stressed the office would have no power or authority; but only would provide information.

Virginia Baptists asked their General Board to study the problem of "pastorates forcibly terminated" and report with recommendations next year; and Illinois Baptists asked a committee to suggest a pay scale for ministers and other church workers--carefully pointing out that the pay scale would not be binding on any church.

Two state conventions--Texas and North Carolina--discussed the possibility of holding a joint session with Negro Baptists in the state. Texas definitely voted to hold such a joint convention and North Carolina asked its General Board to take later action on a similar proposal.

A few conventions featured speakers who called for an end to "racism in our land," and Michigan, Texas and Virginia Baptists adopted strongly-worded statements on race relations. District of Columbia Baptists took in four new black churches, and for the first time, a Negro Baptist woman presided over the sessions of Northwest Baptist Convention which elected her vice president last year.

Generally, the state conventions were quiet, harmonious, and void of controversy. Some observed it was a welcome change from previous sessions.



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