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Record Registration,
Battles Mark SBC

By Stan Haste

DALLAS (BP)--Southern Baptists, in record-shattering numbers, poured into Dallas last week poised for battle and left scarred but with a sliver of hope that peace between warring conservatives and moderates may yet salvage the nation's largest Protestant denomination from self-destruction.

A record 45,431 messengers crowded three halls at Dallas' cavernous Convention Center to reelect its controversial conservative president to a second one-year term, elected his opponent and a second moderate as vice-presidents, and created a peace committee which will attempt over the next year to find reasons for and solutions to the crisis which threatens to divide the 140-year-old Southern Baptist Convention.

The unprecedented crush of messengers virtually doubled the previous record attendance of 22,872, set in Atlanta in 1978. For weeks attendance had been anticipated to pass the Atlanta mark, but the huge turnout took convention planners by surprise.

Charles F. Stanley, 53, pastor of First Baptist Church, Atlanta, was elected to the customary second term only after withstanding a serious challenge from moderate contender W. Winfred Moore, pastor of First Baptist Church, Amarillo, Texas, on a record vote of 24,453 (55.3 percent) to 19,795 (44.7 percent). Even in losing, Moore received more votes than any previous winner in SBC history had garnered.

Moore's challenge came after months of intense campaigning by both sides in a bitter dispute that dates at least to 1979 and the election of the first of four consecutive conservative presidents.

Although the vote for president amounted to high drama, the most electrifying moment of the convention came a few minutes after Stanley's convincing, but closer than expected victory was announced.

Messenger Raymond F. Allen, pastor of Blacksburg Baptist Church, Blacksburg, Va., stepped to the podium to nominate Moore for first vice-president, but without the surprised 65-year-old pastor's knowledge or consent.

Visibly confused, Moore was summoned to the platform by the equally surprised Stanley to say if he would serve if elected. At the podium Moore turned to Stanley and replied: "Let me ask, are you asking me that?"

Although Stanley did not respond, he smiled broadly and Moore declared his willingness to serve.

Moore overwhelmed incumbent conservative first vice-president Zig Zigar, a motivational speaker from Dallas, 22,791-10,957.

A third candidate, attorney Henry Huff of Louisville, Ky.,--a moderate--was elected second vice-president over conservative W.O. Vaught, a retired pastor from Little Rock, Ark.

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Stanley's election came amid predictions he would be returned to office with a smashing victory, especially following the Atlanta pastor's stirring appeal for Christian forgiveness, love and humility in a presidential address three hours before voting.

Another factor at play in the presidential contest arose when evangelist Billy Graham, a Southern Baptist, had an associate send Stanley a message of support. Some moderates expressed the view the Graham endorsement might have been decisive.

Later, at a news conference, Stanley continued to talk of reconciliation but refused to say if he will consult more fully with Moore and Huff than he did during the past year with moderate second vice-president Donald V. Wideman, a North Kansas City, Mo., pastor. Stanley did say he would like to use Moore on the speaking circuit.

At a separate news conference, Moore insisted he will seek to work with Stanley, and declared: "I really am convinced we're seeing a unity we've not seen in our convention in several years."

But Moore's bright portrayal of a first day's developments that seemed to offer something to both sides changed dramatically Wednesday as new controversy loomed.

Although a potentially explosive moment had passed Tuesday afternoon when the convention adopted without serious challenge a slate of trustees for seminaries and agencies brought by the Committee on Boards, Stanley's Committee on Committee's report ignited the convention's most volatile discussions.

Moderates led by Richmond, Va., pastor James Slatton sought to replace the Committee on Committee's entire slate of nominees to the Committee on Boards charged with filling trustee slots for approval at next year's meeting in Atlanta. After Stanley ruled persons nominated from the floor must be considered one by one, messengers overturned the ruling in the convention's closest vote, 12,576-11,801.

The challenge of the key committee's choices was the first ever made, although in recent years moderates have, with mixed success, challenged some proposed trustees. Slatton's action struck at the heart of the conservative-moderate division in that it represented a frontal assault on a sitting president's primary prerogative.

Six years ago, conservatives led by Houston Appeals Court Judge Paul Pressler and Criswell Center for Biblical Studies President Paige Patterson, announced a ten-year plan to take control of the denomination's seminaries and agencies by electing a succession of conservative presidents whose Committees on Committees would nominate biblical inerrantists to Committees on Boards. Those, in turn, would nominate conservative trustees.

The narrow vote, overturning Stanley's ruling, which came at the end of Wednesday morning's session, was followed that evening by an extended, bitter debate, when Stanley announced his three parliamentarians had decided the only way to challenge the Committee on Committee's report was to reject it outright.

Messengers then approved the committee report 13,123 to 9,851. But the vote itself raised more questions, as SBC Registration Secretary Lee Porter said he had received "numerous" reports surplus ballots were distributed outside the convention center before the session opened.

Slatton argued without success challenges from the floor should be allowed, but Chief Parliamentarian Wayne Allen of Memphis, Tenn., supported by Stanley, insisted the decision was final. The Virginia pastor's challenge would have substituted state convention presidents and state Woman's Missionary Union presidents for the committee's nominations.

Frustration and anger carried over to Thursday's final-day deliberations as moderates repeatedly took to microphones on the convention floor to challenge what they considered Stanley's heavy-handed tactics.

The flood of protests subsided only after messengers agreed to a motion by former SBC First Vice-President John P. Sullivan of Shreveport, La., seconded by Moore, to end all challenges to the chair concerning the controversial committee recommendation. Reports from the floor indicate many moderates then streamed out of the hall.

Earlier, messengers overwhelmingly approved a peace plan proposed by state convention presidents and a handful of other prominent Southern Baptists.

The plan creates a committee of 22 persons--20 men and two women--to look into the roots of the denomination's ongoing division and propose solutions leading to reconciliation.

Both Stanley and Moore were named ex-officio members "with full (voting) rights." The committee is composed of roughly equal numbers of conservatives and moderates, with several others uncommitted.

Named chairman of the peace panel was Charles G. Fuller, pastor of First Baptist Church, Roanoke, Va., considered uncommitted in the battle. Fuller also preached this year's convention sermon, a low-key message urging reconciliation in the strife-torn denomination.

The two women, Jodi Chapman of Wichita Falls, Texas, and Christine Gregory of Danville, Va., illustrate the committee's balance. Chapman is the wife of leading conservative Morris Chapman, while Gregory, a former SBC first vice-president, is an outspoken moderate.

The committee was authorized for a possible two years, with the provision it bring at least an interim report next year to the Atlanta convention. If it chooses, the committee may present a final report then.

Besides the motion setting up the peace committee, the convention handled numerous other motions, many by referral. Among matters disposed of on the floor, one called for a Wednesday evening offering for the hungry. It yielded \$77,428.

A potentially explosive issue was defused when Stanley ruled out of order a motion forbidding denominational employees from "taking sides" in the SBC battle, a move intended to chastise some prominent heads of agencies for opposing Stanley's reelection. They included Foreign Mission Board President R. Keith Parks, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Russell H. Dilday and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Roy L. Honeycutt.

Another controversial motion would have amended the Statement on Baptist Faith and Message adopted in 1963 when the convention was in the throes of another theological battle.

Former SBC President Herschel Hobbs, chairman of the committee which drafted the 1963 statement, appealed for messengers to turn down a proposed change to the section on Holy Scripture which would have made even more absolute the assertion the Bible is "truth without any mixture of error." The words "mixture of" would have been deleted. But messengers soundly defeated the proposal.

Debate on resolutions--often the occasion for protracted arguments on the floor of annual meetings--was tempered this year by a decision of the Resolutions Committee to avoid most controversial subjects.

Committee Chairman Larry Lewis, president of Hannibal-LaGrange College, Hannibal, Mo., declared, "There is a time to be prophetic through resolutions but not this year."

But sticking to the committee's determination not to add to the fireworks meant rejecting or referring to denominational agencies all but 11 of the record 74 resolutions formally submitted. All 11 were handily adopted.

Among adopted statements, one urges Southern Baptists "to work diligently" in disseminating information about last year's federal Equal Access Act granting secondary school religious clubs the same use of school property before and after school enjoyed by other extracurricular, nonacademic groups.

Another resolution urged retention of federal tax deductions for contributions made to charitable organizations, including churches, while another protested state officials' efforts to force churches to file forms as political action committees for lobbying for or against issues at referendum.

Other resolutions urged Southern Baptists to respond to current calls to settle new refugees from overseas and expressed opposition to a national lottery, pornography and homosexuality.

Messengers also named former SBC President Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tenn., preacher of next year's convention sermon in Atlanta. Dates for next year's meeting are June 10-12.

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Voting Irregularities
Reported At SBC

By Jim Newton and Ken Camp

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DALLAS (BP)--At least nine persons reported they saw Baptists passing out computerized ballot cards prior to the Wednesday night session of the Southern Baptist Convention, SBC Registration Secretary Lee Porter said on the final day of the convention.

In an interview on the convention floor, Porter also said about 12 to 15 individuals had complained about seeing persons voting more than one ballot.

Porter, however, would not disclose the names of those who said they had seen voting irregularities during the convention.

Although he would not say who they were, Porter said at least two of those who saw ballots being passed out were either former convention officers or convention employees.

"They were persons so well known and respected that you would be able to recognize their names immediately," Porter said. "But they do not want to be identified."

Several persons also approached Earl Potts, executive director of Alabama Baptist Convention and chairman of the SBC Teller's Committee, but Potts would not disclose their names and declined to answer reporters' questions.

Porter said both he and Potts had been sworn to confidentiality, and that they could not disclose the names of the persons who complained about voting irregularities without destroying friendships of 25 years.

Porter said the nine persons who came to him with reports of ballots being distributed prior to the Wednesday night session said they had seen ballot cards passed out in four different locations.

Someone was seen passing out ballots to a group of people getting off a bus near the entrance to the parking garage, Porter said. Someone else was seen handing ballots through a car window outside the main entrance to the convention center.

Another person, according to Porter, was seen holding a stack of ballots about three inches thick, and passing them out near the SBC information desk.

Someone else told Porter they had seen ballots being distributed in the lobby of a downtown hotel, but Porter would not say which hotel.

Porter decried the dishonesty of such practices and said they are in direct violation by SBC By-law 35 which prohibits voting by proxy. The by-law states each messenger must be present at the time the vote is taken.

Porter told convention messengers during the Wednesday evening session that he had heard reports from four members of the Tellers Committee (including Potts) that "numerous persons" were seen passing out ballots outside the convention hall and in the parking garage.

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"I was asked to do something about it, but I can't," Porter told the Wednesday night crowd. "The integrity of the balloting system of the SBC depends on the integrity of local churches and individual messengers.

"You cannot vote another person's ballot if they leave," Porter told the messengers. "We shouldn't have to supervise that in a meeting of 12, let alone a meeting of 40,000 to 45,000."

Porter insisted he was not making charges of voting irregularities against any political faction within the SBC. "We don't know who was doing it," he said. Porter had no information whether the guilty parties might have been "conservatives" or "moderates," as the two groups most commonly are identified.

In an impromptu press conference in the SBC news room Thursday afternoon, Houston Judge Paul Pressler, a leader of the "conservative" side of the SBC controversy challenged Porter to "come forth with proof" to substantiate claims of dishonesty in voting.

"It is disgraceful to make such accusations without presenting proof," Pressler said.

Pressler said he would like the matter investigated, and would be in favor of any found guilty being punished for what he termed "unconscionable" behavior. However, he did not believe supporters of Stanley in his acquaintance were guilty.

"I am sure no one who is a friend of mine would stoop to such tactics as that," he said.

Pressler said he felt the disputed vote was valid since the number of votes recorded was comparable to the number voting prior to the noon break.

Contacted after Pressler's statements were made, Porter declined to comment. "I don't even want to honor his charges with a response," Porter said.

"It seems to me that something I learned as a boy growing up on a farm might apply here: 'The pig that squeals the loudest is the one who has been kicked.'"