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92-98

**SBC takes aim on homosexuality,
Freemasonry, U.S. moral decline**

By Art Toalston & Louis Moore

INDIANAPOLIS, June 11--Messengers to the 135th Southern Baptist Convention drew a line in the sand against growing American tolerance of homosexuality, siding with Vice President Dan Quayle for traditional family values.

Meanwhile, messengers assigned a study of potential conflicts between Christianity and Freemasonry to the SBC Home Mission Board.

Conservatives maintained their grip on the convention, again electing a slate of like-minded convention officers, with Houston pastor Edwin Young as president, and tapping controversial conservative leader Paul Pressler for a key trustee board.

Nearly 18,000 messengers at the June 9-11 meeting in Indianapolis' Hoosier Dome steered clear of much of the rancor of many SBC meetings since the start of the conservative resurgence in 1979. Words of rebuke for past strife among Southern Baptists, however, were voiced in an address by outgoing Foreign Mission Board President R. Keith Parks.

In an historic vote with virtually no opposition, messengers endorsed an SBC constitutional amendment declaring churches approving homosexual behavior "not in friendly cooperation" and thus not eligible to send messengers to annual convention meetings.

In beginning the two-year process to amend the SBC constitution -- the first time it has been shaped to address local church stances on a social issue -- messengers targeted Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., for sanctioning a marriage-like "union" of two homosexual men and Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C., for licensing a homosexual divinity student to the gospel ministry earlier this year.

The amendment, initiated by the SBC Executive Committee, will place the convention "on record in our most significant document" in its Bible-based opposition to the homosexual lifestyle, said committee chairman David Hankins, a Lake Charles, La., pastor.

Quayle, who has sparked national debate over moral values for bemoaning TV's "Murphy Brown," accepted "the scorn and laughter" of "the cultural elite" in addressing the SBC's opening session.

"Talk about right and wrong, and they'll mock us in newsrooms, sitcom studios and faculty lounges across America," Quayle said. "Moral values are what the American people care the most about. This is what I say about the media elite, I wear their scorn as a badge of honor."

Introducing Quayle, SBC President Morris Chapman thanked the vice president for his support of moral values. "Thank you for standing up for the unborn who cannot stand up for themselves. Thank you for raising the conscience of this nation to the importance of the family."

In assigning a Freemasonry study to the Home Mission Board, messengers rejected a motion to form a convention-wide ad hoc committee to investigate the secret fraternal group. An estimated 14 percent of SBC pastors are or have been Masons, according to one denominational study.

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HMB trustees twice have declined to study Freemasonry after the matter was referred to them for consideration by previous conventions. The June 10 action now officially instructs the board, through its interfaith witness department, to do the study.

HMB President Larry Lewis voiced disappointment in an interview after the action. "Any position we take -- either pro Masons or against Masons or neutral -- will generate a certain amount of ire and wrath and thus hurt missions," he said. The HMB nevertheless will do as messengers instructed, he said.

The Freemasonry issue was placed before the convention by Larry Holly, a Beaumont, Texas, physician and former SBC Sunday School Board trustee who had circulated several thousand copies of a 58-page booklet arguing that the god of Freemasonry ultimately is Satan. Holly said he does not oppose Masons being church members but believes the SBC should offer local churches informational help in not accepting Masons in positions of leadership.

Also, in an apparent reference to Masonry, the Committee on Resolutions presented and messengers approved a caution that Baptists "refrain from participation" in "any association which conflicts with clear biblical teachings" on the taking of oaths, mystical knowledge or race relations.

In an SBC presidential race among three nominees described as theological conservatives, Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston and the candidate endorsed by top conservative leaders, won 62.05 percent of 16,085 votes cast June 9. Jess Moody, pastor of Shepherd of the Hills Church in Chatsworth, Calif., received 21.66 percent; Nelson Price, pastor of Roswell Street Baptist Church in Marietta, Ga., 16.28 percent.

Dallas evangelist Jay Strack was unopposed for the SBC's first vice presidency. Ruston, La., evangelist Joe Aulds won a runoff for second vice president over Glen Molette, a Pikeville, Ky., pastor. Three others were nominated on the first ballot.

Lee Porter, registration secretary the past 15 years, won 61.9 percent of the vote in a re-election race with Bob Bender, an Ada, Okla., pastor. Porter is assistant to the pastor and administrator of a Baptist church in Panama City, Fla., and a former Sunday School Board editor. Nashville businessman David Atchison was re-elected recording secretary without opposition.

Young, 55, has been pastor of Second Baptist Church since 1978 when it had 4,431 members. It now has more than 18,000 members and led the SBC with 1,007 baptisms in 1990.

In initial remarks at a news conference, Young called for healing among Southern Baptists and unity in evangelism and missions, saying it is time "put down the guns and go fishing again." He said he intends to seek "wisdom and input from everybody" in SBC committee appointments and to involve more Hispanics, blacks and other SBC ethnics. He called for an end to "pejorative labels" such as fundamentalist, moderate and liberal.

Asked about his church's giving channeled through the Cooperative Program for SBC national and international missions and ministries, Young said it gives between 2 and 3 percent to the CP and that he intends to lead his church "to raise our gifts to missions for all causes."

A motion to substitute another Texan for Paul Pressler's nomination as a trustee of the Foreign Mission Board failed by a wide margin on a June 9 hand vote. Pressler is a Texas appeals court judge, longtime leader of the SBC conservative movement and a member of First Baptist Church of Houston.

Committee on Nominations member Stan Coffey, an Amarillo, Texas, pastor, urged Pressler's approval. "This is a man who sacrificed so much of himself in bringing Southern Baptists back to their historic roots." Coffey also noted Pressler's missions involvement, including preaching in 20 foreign countries.

Pressler, who concluded two terms on the Executive Committee last year, was asked by some SBC leaders prior the convention to decline the nomination. Executive Committee vice chairman Fred Wolfe, a Mobile, Ala., pastor, said in an interview, however, the group told Pressler they "trusted the leadership of the Lord in his making the decision."

The foreign missions report by Parks, who is retiring in October as FMB president over differences with conservatives, stirred numerous interruptions of applause and numerous walkouts.

"We are killing our worldwide witness," Parks stated. "The most distinctive characteristic of Christianity is love. We are not demonstrating love even to the whole Southern Baptist family, and we so desperately need to do so."

Missions giving by local churches of 1, 2 or 3 percent of their budgets will not "support our primary purpose nor challenge us to get serious" about missions, Parks said.

SBC President Morris Chapman, voicing an opposite view in his address, said Southern Baptists are a convention "of destiny, ... (not) because of our own worthiness s ... (but) destiny by God, who has worked mightily among us for his own glory."

Chapman, who will become Executive Committee president-treasurer-elect June 15, cited such figures from SBC history as George W. Truett, E.Y. Mullins, B.H. Carroll, Lee Scarborough and Baker James Cauthen. "Those who would use these names for some other movement pay us the ultimate compliment -- but they cannot and will not hijack our heritage," Chapman said.

The SBC is not fragmented as some have said because the gospel is preached, Chapman declared. But, he said, "To those churches who join a new movement and move away, we offer no word of censure, rebuke or retribution. Know this: We will not be angry but we will not be deterred from the mission God has called us to accomplish for his glory."

Messengers voted to end the SBC's 50-year relationship with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, a Washington-based religious liberty office for 10 Baptist bodies. Messengers in 1991 ended SBC funding of the BJC, which had been the subject of controversy among Southern Baptists. At one time, the SBC provided more than 50 percent of BJC funding.

Executive Committee recommendations also were approved in a dispute with the BJC over a \$300,000 capital fund created by the convention in 1964 for Baptist office space in Washington. SBC action authorizes Executive Committee use of the principal as it deems appropriate and interim payment of interest from the fund to the BJC. The action also declined a binding arbitration proposal.

In a news conference after the convention action, BJC general counsel Oliver Thomas said he would recommend that his board file suit against the SBC over the fund.

Among 15 resolutions approved by messengers were calls for President George Bush to use his influence for "genuine religious freedom" in the Middle East; for Southern Baptists to join in FMB "Green Alert" efforts to evangelize in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe bloc; and for Southern Baptists to "recognize our responsibility" to minister in America's inner cities.

In an apparent caution regarding the emerging Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of SBC moderates, one resolution urged SBC entities to avoid "any conflict of interest, real or perceived, ... by any participation with any organization, program or meeting which would compromise support of the Cooperative Program."

On life issues, messengers approved resolutions opposing "the unethical practice of using fetal tissue from induced abortions in experimental research," euthanasia, assisted suicide and withholding of nutrition from the severely ill. Messengers also called for continued research into more effective pain management.

On societal issues, messengers opposed condom distribution in public schools; opposed "the continuing secularization of the Lord's Day"; offered encouragement to the Boy Scouts of America for maintaining references to God and refusing to allow homosexuals as leaders; and urged Baptists to voice their moral convictions to TV networks, cable systems and advertisers.

A resolution approved on debates among churches about the gender of God states "God is a Spirit, beyond any human gender, ... beyond the limitations of any human word" who has "uniquely and explicitly revealed himself to us as Father."

In other business, a motion to limit annual salaries of all SBC employees to no more than \$100,000 and two motions to place limits on compensation packages for employees who leave SBC agencies were referred to "every institution of the Southern Baptist Convention."

Two motions were referred to the SBC Annuity Board. The first asks the board to reduce the cost of its annual medical deductibles for individuals and families participating in the convention's group health insurance.

The second, jointly referred to the Sunday School Board, urges the formation of a study committee to look into the possibility of providing disability coverage and pastoral care for pastors recovering from "stress burnout."

In "Crossover Indianapolis" pre-SBC evangelistic activities in Indianapolis and elsewhere in Indiana, the state's Baptists in tandem with volunteers across the country recorded more than 1,000 professions of faith in Christ in street witnessing, door-to-door canvassing, church block parties and rallies. The number is more than double the 411 professions of faith during last year's preconvention witnessing blitz in Atlanta.

"This is absolutely fertile territory," said John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention. Sullivan, who has participated in each of the pre-convention witnessing efforts, said, "This is the warmest experience I've had."

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Linda Lawson, Scott Collins, Sarah Zimmerman, David Winfrey, Terry Barone, Orville Scott, Mark Baggett, Cameron Crabtree and Brenda Sanders contributed to this report.

HMB president says decision
on Masons could hurt missions

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press
6/11/92

INDIANAPOLIS (BP)--The decision by Southern Baptists instructing the Home Mission Board to study Freemasonry will inevitably hurt missions, HMB President Larry L. Lewis said.

"I am disappointed in the decision," Lewis said after messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention voted June 10 for the HMB to study Masons rather than form a special committee to study the fraternal organization.

Lewis said sending the issue back to the Home Mission Board is "another attempt (by messengers) to not deal with the issue but refer it to an agency."

"Any position we take -- either pro Masons or against Masons or neutral -- will generate a certain amount of ire and wrath and thus hurt missions," Lewis said.

Yet Lewis said the HMB will do as the messengers instructed and conduct the study.

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**Parks calls for Southern Baptists
to end strife hindering missions** **By Sarah Zimmerman**

INDIANAPOLIS (BP)--In the last of his 13 annual reports as president of the Foreign Mission Board, R. Keith Parks called on Southern Baptists to replace the controversy that he said has hindered the spread of the gospel with love and balance.

"Has the controversy accelerated our purpose of sharing the gospel with the world?" Parks asked during the Foreign Mission Board report to the Southern Baptist Convention. "I would have to answer, 'No.'"

Parks, who will retire Oct. 30 after 38 years of mission service and nearly 13 years as FMB president, was interrupted by applause numerous times during his speech. At other times people left the auditorium.

Parks noted that the propagation of the gospel is the primary purpose of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"The shift of high attendance (at SBC annual meetings) from mission programs to the presidential election and business meetings has to raise the question of whether those of us who are messengers still place this as the highest priority," Parks said.

By 7 p.m. Wednesday, June 10, 17,976 messengers had registered for the meeting in Indianapolis. Less than half of those attended the FMB report Wednesday. The Tuesday evening report of the Home Mission Board followed a vice presidential runoff election when less than 4,400 messengers were present.

The controversy is a "deterrent to and a distraction from" sharing the gospel, Parks said.

Parks cited unreached Bold Mission Thrust goals. Two of the goals, 10,000 volunteers serving in foreign missions and career missionaries serving in 125 countries, have been met but he said it is unlikely the other measurable goals will be reached without divine intervention and a change of attitudes.

Parks noted fewer people are seeking career missionary appointments. Although the 1991 Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions reached a record of \$81.3 million, financial support of missions is not adequate to sustain growth.

"We are killing our worldwide witness," Parks said. "The most distinctive characteristic of Christianity is love. We are not demonstrating love even to the whole Southern Baptist family and we so desperately need to do so."

The Southern Baptist Convention has always been a mix of worship styles, Parks noted. He said a denomination that is focused on control enforced by intimidation will "impoverish our riches and destroy our balance. ... It will jeopardize our future and risk (going to) the unfortunate extremes."

Parks said no one has questioned his commitment to "sound, biblical theology" and to the Bible as a "holy book from God."

Foreign missionaries are "the finest among us" in sound theology and consistent lifestyles, Parks added. "Anyone who questions them speaks either from ignorance, prejudice or malice," he claimed.

Opportunities to share the gospel around the world are beyond imagination, Parks said. He said he fears Southern Baptists have become so short on love that God will pass them by and use another group to reach the world.

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For Southern Baptists to fulfill their evangelistic purpose will require a strong, unquestioned commitment to missions by opinion-makers, Parks said. It also will require that elected officers deliberately bring missions to the center stage of the SBC.

It also is essential for pastors of trend-setting churches to consider a personal call to missions and to lead their churches to be generous supporters of missions, Parks said.

Missions giving by churches of 1, 2 or 3 percent of their budget will not "support our primary purpose nor challenge us to get serious" about missions, Parks said.

"Giving \$11 per year per Baptist won't do it," Parks said. "One of every 4,000 of us going as a missionary won't do it.

"What will it require?" Parks asked. No more than Jesus said. Death to self as individuals, as a church, as a denomination.

"The window of opportunity is now, and it will not last long, maybe three or five years," Parks said. "We must go through that door now."

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FMB search committee
asks for more names

By Robert O'Brien

Baptist Press
6/11/92

INDIANAPOLIS (BP)--The committee searching for a new Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board president has received 31 names and would like more, according to committee chairman Joel Gregory, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas.

Gregory said the committee, which met June 10 in Indianapolis, urges missionaries and other Southern Baptists to continue sending names and background material on candidates to succeed FMB President R. Keith Parks.

Parks, 64, will retire Oct. 30 after a 38-year career in foreign missions, including almost 13 years as president. He has cited philosophical differences with trustees in his retirement decision.

Responding to rumor reports that certain candidates already have an inside track for the job, Gregory said: "No choice has been made -- not even a preliminary choice. All 15 people on this committee have no agenda. No decision has been made. The field of active candidates has not even been narrowed and probably won't be until late summer or early fall."

The committee has met twice and had one conference call. Its next meeting is Monday, June 22, in El Paso, Texas, the site of the Foreign Mission Board's June trustee meeting.

In developing a profile for Parks' successor, the search committee reviewed the 1978 profile developed by the committee seeking a successor to Baker James Cauthen, whom Parks succeeded on Jan. 1, 1980.

While it has been changed, the new profile parallels the 1978 document closely -- including a statement that the new president should have an "unquestioned commitment to foreign missions [and] a ... broad knowledge and understanding of missions ... preferably including missionary service."

Many, including Parks, have said missionary experience is essential for the board's president to understand the complex context and needs of missions today. Names circulated as possible successors to Parks have included several leaders with no missionary experience.

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"The language in the new profile on preferable missionary service was adopted exactly from the 1978 profile," Gregory said. "While not closing out anyone God may lead us to, we stated that missionary service was preferable."

Gregory said the "predominant number of the 31 names received thus far are present or former career missionaries."

Interested Southern Baptists should mail comments, recommendations and biographical data on potential candidates to Joel Gregory, chairman, FMB presidential search committee, 1707 San Jacinto, Dallas, TX 75201 or transmit them via fax to (214) 969-7757.

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Drummond warns against
separating truth, love

By Orville Scott

Baptist Press
6/11/92

INDIANAPOLIS (BP)--Orthodox theology alone will not move the Southern Baptist Convention ahead, Lewis A. Drummond cautioned in his convention sermon June 10.

"In the final analysis, it is not how orthodox we are but whether we're walking in love," said Drummond, who recently became Billy Graham professor of evangelism and church growth at Beeson School of Divinity in Birmingham, Ala. Drummond is retiring as president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

Truth is mightier than the sword, he said, and it freed the people of Eastern Europe as the Iron Curtain crumbled into the dust of history.

The Gospel of John says bare truth alone is not adequate for the Christian, Drummond noted. You cannot separate grace and gospel, he said.

"That grace is fully epitomized in Jesus Christ," Drummond said. "He did something so utterly magnificent and inscrutable on Calvary that only grace can adequately describe it."

Drummond noted, "People matter to God as well as truth. We can speak unvarnished truth ... but for truth to come alive, even God's truth, it must be permeated with grace."

Drummond warned that clinging to truth without grace can lead to formalism, scholasticism and even depersonalizing, legalistic Phariseeism.

Holding to grace alone, he said, can result in a superficial, subjective, non-definable existentialism or humanistic rationalism.

"The world wants to know what we believe about Jesus Christ and the truth of God's Word but it also wants to know if we are like Jesus," Drummond said.

"We are to cling to the truth and be gracious to all people, regardless of who they are or what they believe. ... People matter to God and they should matter to us."

God's truth also must be coupled with sanctification, Drummond said, defining it as "a holy, godly lifestyle."

He recalled a recent Gallup Poll revealed the average Christian prays three minutes per day and the average pastor only seven minutes.

"Too many believers only dip and dabble in the Word of God," Drummond charged. "Of course, their personal word of witness is all but silenced."

Also, Drummond reminded convention messengers that Jesus called love the greatest commandment upon which all the law hangs.

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He warned, however, that love is often misunderstood. Some adopt the "bleeding heart" approach, "so existential that nothing about holiness, judgment, sovereignty and other characteristics and truths of God seem to matter."

On the other hand, there are the "Bible-thumpers" who become legalistic and wield the Bible as a bludgeon.

"The Word of God is not a club, it is a sharp, two-edged sword. It cuts to the quick, but it heals."

"No excuse can be found to gloss over heresy," Drummond said, "but grace, holiness, freedom and love also emanate from the very personhood of our Lord."

"That beautiful blend will drive us to our knees, thus bringing us into much desired unity, and could just precipitate the revival we Southern Baptists sorely need."

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Evangelistic blitz yields
1,024 professions of faith

By Sarah Zimmerman

Baptist Press
6/11/92

INDIANAPOLIS (BP)--More than 1,000 people made professions of faith as Christian witnesses saturated Indiana prior to the Southern Baptist Convention June 9-11 annual meeting.

"I'm thrilled and elated," with the report of 1,024 professions of faith, said Alvin Reid, director of evangelism for the State Convention of Baptists in Indiana. He noted Indiana Baptists reported 3,100 baptisms last year.

The evangelistic blitz, dubbed "Crossover Indianapolis," also helped Indiana reach its goal of starting 52 churches this year. The 52nd congregation began meeting June 7.

"We hope Crossover is the springboard for our growth for 1993 and '94 and '95," said Carrol Fowler, state director of missions and Brotherhood.

Nearly 200 churches statewide held simultaneous revivals the week before the convention. Calvary Baptist Church in New Castle, for example, had 32 professions of faith during its first three nights of revival services.

The 1,024 professions of faith include those made during revival services and a one-day door-to-door soul-winning campaign June 6 before the convention.

During the door-to-door campaign, volunteers contacted 13,900 homes and discovered 1,950 prospects for local churches.

The professions of faith include 192 from street-witnessing efforts in Indianapolis and Fort Wayne, 93 from three block parties in Indianapolis, 44 during a Saturday evening rally and six as a result of a specialized newspaper mailed to 150,000 Indianapolis residents.

The total figure is more than double the 411 professions of faith made during last year's preconvention witnessing blitz in Atlanta.

To reach the church-starting goal, "We had to create a new work attitude across the state, and the (SBC) convention was the vehicle for doing that," Fowler said.

Reports about the need for new churches in Indiana resulted in people who said they wanted to plant their lives in Indiana, Fowler said.

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"Crossover put Indiana on the map," Fowler said. He said he hopes Indiana will continue to benefit from the publicity as he recruits people to help reach the state goal of 53 new churches next year.

Fowler said he is looking for dual-career pastors who can support themselves financially with another job while they start a church. He said he also is looking for volunteers to serve as regional coordinators to help new churches plan a growth strategy and is open to churches outside Indiana sponsoring new churches in the state. For example, First Baptist Church of Moore, Okla., is sponsoring a church in Granger, Ind.

Seven Indiana counties have no Southern Baptist ministries and Fowler said he hopes to have congregations in each of those counties within two years.

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New SBC president addresses
fellow Southeastern alumni

By Paul Brock

Baptist Press
6/11/92

INDIANAPOLIS (BP)--New Southern Baptist Convention President Edwin Young, a Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary graduate, made a surprise address to a crowd of 172 at the school's luncheon June 10.

"I am tired of the 'us-them, you-they' terminology," said Young, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston. "When it comes to describing those going with God and kingdom business, from now on, the terminology will be 'we.'"

Young, elected SBC president June 9, said, "If you look around the world, it's harvest time. I believe Jesus will return very soon. There is a time to plant, plow and weed but now it's time to harvest.

"This is a time of revival like never before in the history of Christianity," Young said. "It's happening all over the world. Are we (Southern Baptists) in on it? It seems most Southern Baptists ... are not even aware of it. Theologically speaking, that ought to scare the hell out of us."

Young said he is convinced there needs to be an effort like never before among Southern Baptists to pray for a spiritual awakening.

Of his seminary alma mater, Young said, "Southeastern is becoming the strategic center for biblically based theological education."

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Charles Stanley urges messengers:
'Devote yourselves to prayer!'

By Brenda J. Sanders

Baptist Press
6/11/92

INDIANAPOLIS (BP)--"Devote yourselves to prayer," Charles Stanley urged messengers attending the final session of the Southern Baptist Convention meeting June 11.

Stanley, pastor of First Baptist Church in Atlanta, said devotion to prayer is the key to discovering God's will and vision for every person.

"Any man of God who devotes himself to prayer will be able to overcome every single obstacle in life and will have no limitations in life, except those which God sets," he said. "That man has learned to tap into the inexhaustible resources of Almighty God.

"If you and I learn to draw from within, not from without, seeking the mind of God, the Spirit of God who lives inside of us will release in you and through you every single thing you need to become and to do what God has called you to do."

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Stanley identified a problem he said many Christians face: "We limit what God can do in our lives by judging ourselves by the past or comparing ourselves with other people. We look back instead of looking up to God.

"That's exactly what this convention's been doing for years," he continued. "Suppose we as a denomination would say, 'God, we're not going to look back, we're looking up.' What then would be the potential of the Southern Baptist Convention?" Stanley asked. "What could we do if we devoted ourselves to prayer and trusted God to provide everything we need to do exactly what he wants us to do?"

"I don't think our minds could conceive of the overwhelming, awesome results that would take place!" he declared. "There is no way we could fathom it.

"One of our problems," he said, "is we compete with one another on the one hand and compare ourselves with one another on the other hand, and we're always in this state of turmoil. God wants us to be free of competition and comparison, looking to him and set apart for his plan and his purpose for life.

"What God does in your life really has nothing to do with your education, your eloquence, your ability or talent, but it does have a great deal to do with your devotion to Christ and to prayer," he said.

"Prayer is the key to getting God's vision for your life. Once you have that sense of direction, everything in you begins to churn. You become more creative; God begins to show you how to do things that you would never be able to figure out yourself."

Prayer "is the answer to every facet of the life of the man of God," Stanley said.

"If you'll devote yourself to prayer, God will supply your needs. You'll get a sense of his viewpoint and his timing for your life.

"Devote yourself to prayer," Stanley challenged. "When you do that, God will clarify your vision, provide all your needs, knock down obstacles and open doors of opportunity. Then, you can be all God intends for you to be."

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First-time messengers
reflect on meeting

By Kay Moore

Baptist Press
6/11/92

INDIANAPOLIS (BP)--Colorful nominating speeches, frustrations with messengers who seem disinterested during music and sermons and the assemblage of thousands of people who clearly "have a heart for God" were some of the key impressions mentioned by first-time messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention.

New messengers interviewed said they believed convention business flowed smoothly, yet several said they wished they had known more about resolutions on which they voted.

First-time messenger Laura Horne, 17, a member of First Baptist Church in Bridgeport, Texas, said she attended the convention as a child with her parents and wanted to have a firsthand messenger experience since she now is a college freshman.

Horne said she was impressed with how the parliamentary process worked during business meetings. "We had it in clubs in school but didn't always take it seriously," she said. "I was impressed with how it worked with that size crowd."

Mel Blackaby, pastor of Bluff Dale Baptist Church in Bluff Dale, Texas, said he served as a messenger because he wanted to observe the convention up close instead of from afar as he had when growing up in Canada.

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He said he enjoyed seeing the gathering of "many good people who have a heart for God." Blackaby said he thought the meeting showed "God's not through with Southern Baptists yet."

Blackaby said he was disappointed with the low turnout for the Home Mission Board and Foreign Mission Board reports.

"A lot of people make noise for missions but weren't there for the reports," Blackaby said.

Likewise, Jana Wilkins, a new messenger from First Baptist Church in Nashville, said she was disappointed the audience milled around during the music and preaching.

Charles Buford, a first-time messenger from Suburban Baptist Church in Granite City, Ill., said he wished he had heard more "amens" from the crowd during the preaching. "There was no excitement about things we should be excited about." He echoed the sentiments of several other messengers who said they could have used more advance information on resolutions.

Kay Smith, a first-time messenger from First Baptist Church in Roscoe, Texas, said she was pleased the convention went on record to oppose homosexuality but also was touched when the convention prayed for the North Carolina churches that were subjects of the action.

Although she was only one among the nearly 18,000 messengers registered for the convention, Smith said she felt her "one vote was important," as did Mike Arrington, a vice president of the Baptist Sunday School Board who this year was messenger to the convention for the first time.

Arrington, member of First Baptist Church in Franklin, Tenn., said the large size of the meeting "does not deter it from becoming a personal experience for everyone."

David Wooten, pastor of Forest Hill Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, N.C., serving as first-time messenger after seven months in his first pastorate, said his most memorable moment occurred outside the convention hall as he sat in the lobby of a hotel near the Hoosier Dome.

"About 60 to 75 Southern Baptists gathered around a piano spontaneously and sang hymns," he said. "It blessed my heart to say I was part of the group doing that. Many hotel observers said how nice it was."

Messengers also cited as highlights the colorful presidential nominating speeches of entertainer Jerry Clower and Joel Gregory, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas.