

Fundamentalists regain Southern Baptist presidency: Atlanta- area pastor Johnny Hunt elected

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Atlanta-area pastor Johnny Hunt has been elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention, returning control of the 16-million-member denomination to its fundamentalist establishment.

On June 10, the opening day of the 2008 SBC annual meeting in Indianapolis, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Woodstock, Georgia, received 52.94 percent on the first ballot, beating out five contenders—a record number of candidates.

In remarks after his election, Hunt said, “I hope to unite our hearts around the things that we believe that Christ is most committed to.” Hunt said he hopes to represent that view of Southern Baptists to the broader public as well. He lamented that, in their support for conservative issues in the “culture war,” Southern Baptists “oftentimes . . . come across as only what we’re against.”

Hunt will succeed South Carolina pastor Frank Page, who won an upset victory in 2006 as the candidate favored by reform-minded bloggers and younger pastors. Hunt was widely expected to win that election but pulled out of the contest at the last minute.

Hunt’s triumph this year reflected a pattern that began in 1979; since then the establishment candidate won 25 of 27 elections. The reformers who had supported Page did not coalesce behind a single candidate this year.

The new president encouraged Southern Baptists not to dwell on what has divided the convention in the past. Southern Baptists must be realistic about a new concern, Hunt said, noting that last year the convention, with a membership of 16 million, baptized fewer people than it did in 1950 with 6 million members.

“What’s wrong with this picture? We have a larger army [today]. We ought to be taking more territory,” he said.

On another issue, combatting sexual abuse in churches, an SBC official, citing traditional Baptist “belief in the autonomy of each local church,” said the denomination’s executive committee would not support the creation of a national database listing sexual offenders in SBC churches.

“Southern Baptists believe that the local church in New Testament times was autonomous, and thus our local churches are autonomous,” executive committee president Morris Chapman said in his address at the annual meeting.

The decision was greeted with disapproval from some Baptist activists on the issue of child abuse. A motion passed nearly unanimously by delegates (called messengers) to last year’s meeting asked officials to study the database idea.

However, in its report the executive committee noted that “it would be impossible to assure that all convicted sexual predators who ever had a connection with a Baptist church would be discoverable for inclusion on such a list.” The report also stated that a Baptist-only database would likely omit sexual offenders coming to SBC churches from other denominations.

But one activist said that was a strange rationale. “Interesting objection—that not all perpetrators could possibly be included,” said Dee Ann Miller, an Iowa mental health worker and former Southern Baptist missionary. “I’m sure people in every state could argue the same, yet names of convicted offenders are readily available to the public,” she said. “So why would 100 percent be expected of any list?”

The committee recommended that SBC churches use the Department of Justice’s national sex-offender database, calling it the best resource for protecting congregations against employing known abusers. Miller said that list is incomplete as well, and could best be used in conjunction with other databases.

The committee’s action came nearly a month after a staff minister at a prominent Dallas-area Southern Baptist megachurch—Joe Barron, Prestonwood Baptist Church’s minister to married adults—was arrested and forced to resign over his alleged involvement in an online underage sex sting.

In other matters, the messengers referred motions to the executive committee for consideration and a report to the 2009 annual meeting. They included proposals to:

- Reconsider the SBC's 2004 decision to withdraw from the Baptist World Alliance, which is composed of more than 200 Baptist conventions and other organizations. At the time, SBC critics charged the umbrella group with being "too liberal." Larry Walker, a messenger from First Baptist Church in Dallas, proposed the SBC-BWA reconciliation. Walker stressed that many small Baptist conventions and unions—a number of them located where Baptists and other Christians face daily persecution—need the support and encouragement of the SBC, the world's largest Baptist denomination.
- Amend the SBC's constitution to disallow affiliation by "churches which have female senior pastors." The convention's Baptist Faith and Message doctrinal statement asserts, "The office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by scripture." However, it is not binding on local churches, and several SBC-affiliated churches have female senior pastors. *-Associated Baptist Press*