

Southern Baptists seek to shake membership malaise: Plummeting baptism rates

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Southern Baptists opened their annual meeting last month with calls to turn around plummeting baptism rates, even as researchers warned that the nation's largest Protestant body could lose half its size by mid-century.

"I really do believe that we need revival in the Southern Baptist Convention," said SBC president Johnny Hunt, a pastor from Woodstock, Georgia. "I believe we need revival in the hearts of our leaders, starting with your president."

Drawing particular attention at the June 23-24 meeting in Louisville, Kentucky, was a new report from the denomination's LifeWay Research. The study concluded that SBC membership could drop by close to 50 percent by 2050 if the denomination doesn't do more to reverse its image as an aging and mostly white religious body.

"We're aging," Hunt acknowledged in his presidential address. "One of the reasons—and it is a true reason—is we need to really join with our brothers of ethnicity in this convention." He chastised his fellow Baptists for being "professional" rather than passionate about their faith.

He noted how many Americans didn't know the term *Laodicean* when it was the winning word in the National Spelling Bee championship this year. The word, which means lukewarm, refers to a church that the author of the book of Revelation bemoans as "neither cold nor hot."

Hunt implied that many pastors and laypeople are modern-day Laodiceans. "We challenge the people, go home and forget what we preach just as quickly as they do."

Reelected at the meeting to a traditional second one-year term, Hunt was also given approval by delegates to appoint a task force to implement his coauthored "Great

Commission Resurgence” declaration.

It calls for maintaining Baptist belief in an error-proof Bible and the principles that undergirded the conservative resurgence that began in the denomination 30 years ago. It also calls for streamlining the church’s work and becoming more open to new ways of starting churches and conducting mission work.

While some senior leaders, including Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, argued that a task force to study Hunt’s plan would be a waste of time and money, the initiative seemed to capture the imagination of younger Baptists.

“This Great Commission Resurgence is something that we as young pastors can get behind and support,” said Jarrett Stephens, associate pastor for young singles at Prestonwood Baptist Church in Plano, Texas.

It also drew the support of Billy Graham, 90, one of the best-known Southern Baptists, who sent a handwritten note to his South Carolina pastor that was read to the convention on June 24. “The clear and certain proclamation of the gospel is paramount,” said Graham.

Among other actions, the 8,700 Southern Baptists overwhelmingly expressed their “pride” in President Obama’s election as the nation’s first African-American president while also criticizing his policies that they oppose.

The resolution said Baptists “share our nation’s pride in our continuing progress toward racial reconciliation signaled by the election of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44th president of the United States of America.”

The statement also commended Obama for his “evident love for his family” and retention of security policies that “continue to keep our nation safe from further terrorist attacks.”

At the same time, Baptists voiced strong opposition to his expansion of federal funding “for destructive human embryo research” and “pro-abortion groups” and reduction of funding for abstinence education. The resolution also opposed Obama’s designation of June as “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Pride Month.”

Dwight McKissic, a black pastor from Arlington, Texas, who proposed the resolution, hailed its passage as a milestone of racial progress for Southern Baptists, who trace

their roots to the national divide over slavery that split many U.S. denominations into northern and southern branches. "I think it was important to all African-American Southern Baptists," said McKissic, who voted for Republican John McCain last year.

In 1995, Southern Baptists passed a resolution apologizing to African Americans for condoning racism and committed to work to eradicate it within the denomination. - *Religion News Service*