

Convicted felon loses bid to regain top Baptist post: National Baptist Convention chooses Julius Scruggs instead

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Despite a highly publicized effort to regain the presidency of the nation's largest African-American Baptist denomination, disgraced pastor Henry Lyons overwhelmingly lost his election bid last month.

Henry Lyons, a former president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, lost 4,108 to 924 to Alabama pastor Julius Scruggs when delegates cast their ballots September 10 at the denomination's annual meeting in Memphis.

Lyons resigned from the NBCUSA's presidential post ten years ago after being convicted of swindling more than \$5.2 million from organizational partners of the denomination.

Scruggs, pastor of First Missionary Baptist Church in Huntsville, Alabama, had served previously as the convention's vice president at large. The two men, both 67, sought an office that carries a salary of \$100,000 a year for a five-year term.

Lyons filed a lawsuit to prevent the balloting, objecting to the way delegates were assigned. But a judge cleared the way for the election to take place as scheduled.

Backers of Lyons, who served nearly five years in prison after his conviction on state racketeering and grand-theft charges and after he pleaded guilty to federal tax-evasion charges in 1999, said he is a changed man who has paid his debt to society.

Supporters of Scruggs, meanwhile, said that even if Lyons is sorry for his past, it would be a mistake to put him back in charge after the huge scandal, which severely tarnished the convention's reputation.

Lyons, a charismatic preacher who was elected as NBCUSA president in 1994 on promises that he would help alleviate the convention's financial woes, remains a polarizing figure. Opponents feared his election would split the NBCUSA, which claims 7.5 million members and is America's oldest African-American denomination as well as the largest.

Lyons's successor in the office, pastor William Shaw of White Rock Baptist Church in Philadelphia, worked to restore confidence in the denomination. He helped institute new guidelines for conducting convention business that became known as the VISA Principles—VISA being an acronym for "Vision, Integrity, Structure and Accountability."

Elected president in 1999, Shaw served two five-year terms and was ineligible for a third. He was a featured speaker at the New Baptist Covenant Celebration in Atlanta in 2008 and was widely active in ecumenical organizations.

Lyons had been a powerful voice in Baptist life before his downfall, which began in 1997 when his wife burned down a \$700,000 home that he, along with another woman, co-owned. Lyons and his wife later divorced.

The arson case brought attention to a lavish lifestyle that investigators said Lyons bankrolled with funds obtained through his leadership role in the denomination. In February 1998 Lyons was arrested on the state charges. He was convicted a year later, and then resigned the next month as president of the convention.

Lyons then pleaded guilty to federal charges and served concurrent prison sentences for his crimes. He served four years and eight months of a five-and-a-half-year prison sentence before his release in December 2003. *-Bob Allen, Associated Baptist Press*