

Young conservatives, bloggers help pick new SBC president: Agree on inerrancy and wish to consider new ideas

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In an unusual three-way race for leadership of the nation's largest Protestant denomination, pastor Frank Page of South Carolina was elected in an upset as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, giving hope to many younger conservatives that the usual powerbrokers have suffered a setback.

The election of the 53-year-old pastor of First Baptist Church of Taylors—a 4,000-member church that contributes heavily to SBC mission agencies—is giving young leaders hope about their recent influence and their future involvement in the 16.2-million-member denomination.

Some in the fledgling Baptist blogging community—which has gained prominence in the last year—have felt there has been a narrowing focus on nonessential aspects of doctrine within Baptist ranks.

On the eve of this year's annual meeting of Southern Baptists, Micah Fries said that as a 27-year-old pastor in St. Joseph, Missouri, he often feels left out of influential SBC events.

But with the June 14 election in Greensboro, North Carolina, of Page, a self-described “normal” pastor, Fries and other young pastors and bloggers say they have greater hopes for inclusion. “It’s a whole new world,” said Fries. “There’s no small circle of leadership. There’s no attempt to divide and conquer. He wants others to get involved.”

International Mission Board trustee Wade Burleson—like Page a relative unknown in the Southern Baptist Convention before this year— and other bloggers attribute the

election results to the ramped-up computer conversations.

“These young men and women . . . got the word out,” Burleson, 44, said of bloggers. “It’s a new day.”

Page squeaked by with a slim majority—50.48 percent—of the vote of about 11,000 messengers, or delegates. His opponents, Ronnie Floyd of Springdale, Arkansas, and Jerry Sutton of Nashville, split the remaining votes with about 24 percent each. Floyd had been endorsed by three of the denomination’s six seminary presidents.

(Associated Baptist Press said Page’s election signaled a defeat for the SBC’s conservative powerbrokers, who have hand-picked all but one president since 1979. Only Orlando pastor Jim Henry, elected in 1994 and 1995, lacked the endorsement of the SBC’s conservative leaders.)

Before the voting, David Key, director of Baptist Studies at Emory University in Atlanta, indicated that there was “much more dissatisfaction out there than what the party in power is perceiving.”

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said Page’s outspoken support of the denomination’s central funding program hit a nerve for the voting delegates.

SBC churches currently give an average of 6.6 percent of income to the denomination, a decline from 10.7 percent in 1980, said Anthony Jordan of Oklahoma, chair of an ad hoc committee studying the issue. Page’s church contributes 12.1 percent of its 2005 undesignated receipts to the Cooperative Program, an amount substantially higher than that given by Floyd’s and Sutton’s congregations.

Tad Thompson, a 31-year-old pastor from Siloam Springs, Arkansas, said he thinks young ministers like himself agree with older leaders on inerrancy—the belief that the Bible is without error—but are interested in new ideas and newer ways of worship, such as his church services that “lean” toward contemporary music.

Page said he would seek to create a more open convention, but added: “I’m not trying to undo a conservative movement that I have supported all these years.”

SBC presidents have considerable appointive powers, filling posts on various boards and agencies. Page said he would continue the trend of appointing people who

believe in Bible inerrancy but would appoint those who also have “a sweet spirit.”

“I’m an inerrantist—I believe in the word of God—I’m just not mad about it,” Page said. –*Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*