

Carter, Clinton urge new Baptist covenant network: Gathering planned for early 2008

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Leaders from 40 Baptist organizations are joining forces with former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton to hold a gathering next January that will emphasize their common goals, especially to counter the public image of Baptists as predominantly tied to conservative political and cultural stances.

The “Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant” was announced last month at the Carter Center in Atlanta during a meeting of the two presidents—who were both raised Southern Baptist—and dozens of leaders who together represent an estimated 20 million Baptists in North America.

The gathering, planned for January 30–February 1, 2008, in Atlanta, is expected to draw up to 20,000 Baptists, including Carter and Clinton. That large a crowd may be possible because some historically black Baptist conventions will end their large 2008 mid-winter meetings in Atlanta only hours before the inaugural covenant meeting starts. It is hoped that the black church delegates will stay to join the various moderate Baptist groups for future networking on social justice ministries.

Carter, who cut his Southern Baptist ties in 2000, has sought for years to bring together moderate Baptists overshadowed by the media prominence of politically conservative Baptists. The announcement was a novel step for Clinton—still a member of an Arkansas Baptist church—who started as a cheerleader for the effort and later agreed to be a speaker.

“Those of you who don’t follow the ins and outs of various denominations in America, or did not have both the privilege and the burden to be raised in the Baptist church, cannot possibly appreciate how different this meeting is from what has gone on in our denomination the last 30 years,” Clinton said at the January 9 news conference.

The initiative stems from a covenant written last April that reaffirmed commitment to traditional Baptist values—not only evangelism but also helping the needy and promoting Baptist independence from government entanglements. “We decided that day in April that the most important things were things that we agreed on, and we also decided that we could accomplish more on these imperatives working together than any one of us could alone,” said Bill Underwood, president of the Baptist-affiliated Mercer University in Macon, Georgia.

The endeavor is the brainchild of Carter and Underwood, who came to Mercer last year from Baylor University, where he was a law professor, then briefly the interim president. The two enlisted Jimmy Allen, the last moderate president of the Southern Baptist Convention (1977-1979), as program chair for the 2008 gathering. Allen is also adjunct professor of ethics at Mercer’s McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta.

“There is an exciting surge of interest for a new relationship among Baptists after years of hearing only the voice of the religious right,” Allen told the Century. One newspaper headline erroneously trumpeted the group as a “New Baptist Convention,” said Allen, who scrambled to seek a correction in light of the widespread Baptist aversion to centralization and the cherishing of congregational autonomy.

Allen said he sensed a shift in religious climate in the U.S., which “was simply affirmed by the political change in November.” Indeed, four historic black Baptist denominations met in Nashville two years ago to move beyond old divisions over leadership and civil rights.

William Shaw, president of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., was in Atlanta to endorse the new covenant. “God is moving to make faith real, addressing the issues we face in nonpolitical and nonpartisan ways, but [also] in prophetic ways,” he said.

Shaw is one of the five presidents of the new Christian Churches Together USA, which has organized an unprecedented body of mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical-Pentecostal and racial-ethnic church leaders. That group, focused on mutual understanding and agreed-upon issues, will officially celebrate its launch February 7 in Pasadena, California.

Southern Baptist Convention officials reacted skeptically to the covenant announcement. Frank Page, SBC president, said that before “engaging in a war of words, let’s do a reality check.” Page said that Southern Baptists “are presenting a

positive life-changing message” and have been praised for their racial and ethnic diversity.

Morris H. Chapman, president of the Nashville-based SBC executive committee, disputed the allegation that people have a negative perception of Baptists and said that the 16-million-member SBC addresses world hunger in a big way, including a \$5.8 million effort last year.

A news story from Baptist Press, an arm of the SBC executive committee, observed that “the 2008 confabulation Clinton and Carter propose will coincide with a U.S. presidential election year.” Democrats, the story noted, have made winning over “faith voters” a major election strategy. Allen said that organizers recognized that that would be an issue, and they hope to involve some Republican participants in the meeting.