

Southern Baptists debate ways to revive growth: Teen baptisms dropping

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Southern Baptist Convention president Johnny Hunt has urged members of the nation's largest Protestant denomination to move beyond their comfort zones as they seek new ways to evangelize and combat declining baptism rates.

"I'm tired of having my membership in a convention that's declining," he said in a presidential address on June 15, the opening day of the two-day SBC annual meeting in Orlando, Florida.

"I'm tired of not putting the priority in reaching teenagers for Jesus Christ. I'm tired of being hammered over and over again about money instead of the mission in Jesus' name. Let's get a compelling vision that people would want to give more money to."

Taking up that charge will be Bryant Wright, senior pastor of a church in Marietta, Georgia, who beat out three other candidates to succeed Hunt as the SBC's next president. Wright, 57, is founder of Right from the Heart Ministries, a broadcast and Internet ministry focused on evangelism.

Hunt's remarks came as delegates spent more than two hours debating whether to adopt a "Great Commission Resurgence Task Force" report, which later passed by a clear majority after heated arguments before and during meeting.

The report noted that the number of teenagers baptized by Southern Baptists has dropped from 140,000 in 1970 to 75,000 in 2008. It also stated that the average Southern Baptist gives 2.5 percent of his or her annual income to local and wider church causes.

Though Baptists have long been committed to Jesus' command to make disciples in all nations, there was deep division among members of the 16.1-million-member

denomination over the report's recommendations.

Critics cautioned that those recommendations could have detrimental effects on Southern Baptist agencies, including cutting the budget of its Executive Committee and changing the way state Baptist conventions work with the denomination's domestic mission board.

One of the harshest critics has been the outgoing Executive Committee president, Morris Chapman, whose elected successor is a former convention president, Frank Page.

Resolutions adopted June 17 by delegates, who are called messengers, included a veiled but sharp critique of the nation's oil companies on June 16, saying "all industries are . . . accountable to higher standards than to profit alone."

Messengers said the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico was a timely reminder that 'our God-given dominion over the creation is not unlimited, as though we were gods and not creatures.'

The nonbinding statement comes as various religious groups are struggling to determine how best to respond to the spill and those whose livelihoods hang in the balance.

"We call on Southern Baptists to be ready to assist the communities and churches of the Gulf Coast through the clean-up process with the same generosity of spirit that Southern Baptists exhibited after Hurricane Katrina of 2005," it reads.

The theologically conservative Baptists also adopted statements stemming from their opposition to homosexuality, the proposed Employment Non-Discrimination Act and plans to allow openly gay members to serve in the military. -*Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*