

SBC leaves alliance, may drop "Southern" Plans for a new international network of conservative Christians: Plans for a new international network of conservative Christians

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As “a network of churches that circle the planet,” the Southern Baptist Convention must consider changing its name to “reflect who we are and what we are doing nationally and internationally,” SBC President Jack Graham told the Executive Committee of the nation’s largest Protestant denomination.

At the same Nashville meeting in which the SBC leaders voted overwhelmingly to sever the denomination’s longtime membership in the Baptist World Alliance, Graham suggested on February 16 that it is time to take a name reflecting the SBC’s preeminence among conservative Christians.

“I have loved the Southern Baptist Convention and its name,” said Graham, pastor of the Dallas-area Prestonwood Baptist Church. “But this name that I love and you love speaks of our region and doesn’t move us beyond to the great cities of the Northeast, to the West and the Midwest. It’s time to consider a new name that reflects our future.”

Despite pleas from Baptist leaders worldwide and some Southern Baptists not to leave the BWA, the Executive Committee voted 62-10 to approve the recommendation from a study committee. Messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention in June will vote on final approval. The action would take effect October 1, deleting the final \$300,000 of annual SBC support for the Baptist World Alliance,

which has 211 member bodies and an annual budget of \$1.7 million.

The SBC, with 16 million members, is the largest member body and biggest contributor to the Baptist World Alliance. But the conservative leaders of the SBC say the organization has become too liberal, a charge Baptist leaders worldwide deny. Southern Baptist leaders say they will form a new international network of like-minded conservative Christians.

The break with the BWA has seemed almost certain after the world body admitted as a new member the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an association of moderate congregations critical of the SBC. Southern Baptists had objected to the CBF's admittance to the BWA.

Reviving the question of a name change, however, was somewhat surprising since resolutions to that effect have always failed in the past. Graham said he will appoint a name-change study committee that is "geographically and generationally" representative. "It is my prayer that the committee can bring a recommendation to the SBC in 2005," he said. "Timing is everything," said Graham, noting that "seven or eight" previous studies of a possible name change resulted in no change, including one initiated by Dallas Pastor W. A. Criswell in 1974. The most recent effort was in 1999.

"This is a significant, important decision," Graham said, but "Southern Baptists are always willing to embrace significant change." He added that "we've seen amazing change in the Southern Baptist Convention since 1979," referring to the last year a moderate president headed the SBC.

"A name change will not change the hearts of people," Graham said, "but it will speak to people in New York, in Los Angeles, in the Pacific Northwest, in Canada, and around the world that we are a global network of churches committed to proclaiming Jesus Christ throughout the world." Graham noted that he had floated the idea to many key SBC leaders who seemed favorable to the change.

Graham's call for a new name came toward the end of a sermon on the theme of spiritual warfare. Baptists face a culture war, Graham said, illustrated by the halftime show at the Super Bowl, "which became the Toilet Bowl."

A political war is also at hand, Graham said. "There will be a very clear choice in the decision of 2004 as to what kind of leadership and values will represent our country,

conservative Christian values versus no values or liberal values.” Graham did not specifically endorse President George W. Bush but said, “I’m thankful that he is a man of faith.”

Christians also face an ecclesiastical war, he said, illustrated by the Episcopal Church’s division over the election of a homosexual bishop, and a domestic war, as seen in the court order to allow gay marriage in Massachusetts.

Graham did not mention a war looming as well between the BWA and a new SBC-led Baptist coalition, but some of the more conservative Baptists bodies around the world have already expressed interest—raising the possibility of two competing worldwide organizations of Baptists.

The hour-long debate on the BWA was limited to Executive Committee members. Denton Lotz, the alliance’s general secretary, was present but not permitted to speak. “We are, of course, very sad,” Lotz said after the vote. “Any time there is a breach in fellowship, it is sad.” Opposition from within the Executive Committee focused on preserving Baptist unity worldwide. But supporters said unity must take a back seat to a “biblical stand” on theological issues. –*Associated Baptist Press*