

# Moderates ponder future in North Carolina after ninth loss\_111703

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**By Greg Warner**

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WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP)-Conservative David Horton was elected president of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina Nov. 11 in what was anticipated as a make-or-break election for moderate Baptists in the state.

Moderate David Hughes, 51, pastor of First Baptist Church in the host city of Winston-Salem, garnered 40.5 percent of the 3,840 votes cast—a weaker showing than either candidate anticipated.

“I was surprised, because the elections are always so close,” said Horton, pastor of Gate City Baptist Church in nearby Greensboro. He received 59.5 percent, the largest winning margin for a non-incumbent since 1987 and the largest since 1996 for a presidential candidate facing opposition.

Horton's election is the ninth in a row won by conservative presidential candidates. He succeeds conservative Jerry Pereira, 49, pastor of First

Baptist Church of Swannanoa, who would have completed his second term as president but died four days before the convention, following a six-month battle with cancer. In an unusual move, Pereira endorsed Horton and other conservative officer candidates.

Even before the vote, there was speculation among messengers that moderate Baptists would disengage from the state convention if they lost another election, perhaps forming a new convention as has been attempted in a few other states.

After the election, Horton, 43, told reporters he hopes moderates will continue to accept the place open to them in the convention. "There has been a place at the table ... for moderates and conservatives, and there will continue to be a place at the table for moderates." He added moderates and conservatives still agree on more issues than they disagree.

Hughes, however, suggested many moderates no longer feel "a sense of place and belonging." The sound defeat gave moderates "a clear-cut answer" for the future, he said. "While I'm disappointed with the choice that was made, I'm glad there is more clarity than there was before."

"Today the convention spoke for the ninth year in a row.... That's very definitive," Hughes told reporters in an unusual joint press conference with Horton. "This convention is lining up squarely behind the Southern Baptist Convention, and I think that it's good to get out on the table where things stand."

Hughes said there is "a sense of discouragement and resignation among moderates. ... I've been trying to get them to stay involved." But he admitted that encouragement has been met with mixed reviews.

He predicted moderates will take some time to assess the situation, then gather to determine their course.

“Not all moderates will do the same thing,” he said. “These folks are like herding cats; they are very independent thinkers. ... It will be well into next year before it's clear who might be doing what.”

Jim Royston, executive director-treasurer of the convention, said the staff will continue to work with all 3,803 churches in the convention, regardless of their alignment. He credited both Horton and Hughes for “rolling up their sleeves” and working within the convention.

“I wish this was an example of shared leadership,” Royston said, a reference to the aborted proposal to alternate the presidential position between conservatives and moderates. Horton and Hughes became friends when both worked to pass the “shared leadership” plan, which was defeated by convention messengers in 1999.

“I think the convention has to decide to do shared leadership,” Horton responded. He said the plan failed “because the convention didn't want to be given parameters” for convention officers. He said the current system is “a good process.”

By most accounts, the presidential election was in part a referendum on the conservative shift in the Southern Baptist Convention, now in its third decade. Horton's support for the SBC was mentioned at least four times in the three-minute nomination speech from retired Winston-Salem pastor Mark Corts.

And while Hughes suggested in recent weeks that the North Carolina convention should consider reducing its funding of the SBC to address its own budget shortfall, Horton said after the vote, “I think my election signals strong support for continued giving to the Southern Baptist Convention.”

Horton said the SBC is “really worthy of our support,” and he encouraged Baptists in the state “to do everything we can to give more to the Southern

Baptist Convention” and the North Carolina convention.

Meanwhile, North Carolina Baptists twice affirmed a decision to oust McGill Baptist Church in Concord from the state convention for baptizing two men presumed to be gay.

Messengers overwhelmingly voted down a motion Nov. 11 to reconsider the ouster. A day earlier, the convention's Executive Committee affirmed the earlier decision by Executive Director-Treasurer Jim Royston to remove the church. The committee's Nov. 10 vote followed a lengthy discussion and an interview with church representatives.

McGill's baptism of the two men led to the church's ouster from the Cabarrus Baptist Association last April.

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