

Missouri Baptist Convention shuts out CBF-affiliated churches

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SPRINGFIELD, Mo. (ABP)-The Missouri Baptist Convention no longer is open to churches that support any organization considered to compete with the state convention or the Southern Baptist Convention.

The changes will shut out congregations that participate in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship or the moderate Baptist General Convention of Missouri but make exceptions for other Baptist organizations.

Such “single alignment” rules are rare in modern Baptist life. Likewise, state conventions normally do not require churches to be Southern Baptist members as well-a practice some historians consider “un-Baptistic” connectionalism.

Meeting Oct. 24-26 at Second Baptist Church in Springfield, messengers adopted two constitutional amendments on second reading that narrow Missouri Baptist Convention membership requirements.

Passed by raised-ballot vote, the first amendment changed the membership eligibility requirement from “any Baptist church in sympathy with the objects of the convention” to “any Southern Baptist church singly aligned with the convention.”

As approved, the membership article permits Missouri Baptist Convention-affiliated churches to relate to racial, ethnic, cultural and community organizations and conventions, as long as those relationships do not violate the state convention's constitution and bylaws or “accepted Southern Baptist faith, polity and practice.”

An adopted amendment to the constitution's relationship article allows the state convention to determine the churches with which it will cooperate. The article had allowed the convention to decline to seat messengers. The change now allows the convention to “decline to accept or continue cooperation with a church” as well.

Messengers overwhelmingly defeated two attempts to modify the proposed constitutional changes.

One amendment attempted to eliminate the word “singly.” Amendment author Jim Goforth of St. Louis said the intent of the alignment language is to prevent churches from supporting the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship at national and state levels and the Baptist General Convention of Missouri, an alternative state convention organized in April 2002 by individuals dissatisfied with the Missouri Baptist Convention's direction.

Calling it a matter of “integrity,” Goforth said the convention could not call affiliation single alignment when the constitution would allow cooperation with other organizations.

“I wish we would have the courage to just name the organizations and be honest about it,” he said.

Proponents of the constitutional changes argued that if specific organizations were listed, they could simply get around the constitution by changing their corporate names.

Messengers also rebuffed an attempt by David Mason of Green Valley Baptist Church in St. Joseph to return the proposals to the committee for continuing review. He suggested consideration of the proposals be delayed until legal action currently pending between the Missouri Baptist Convention and five institutions is settled.

The convention filed legal action in August 2002 to try to force the Baptist Home, Missouri Baptist University, the Missouri Baptist Foundation, Windermere Baptist Conference Center and the Word & Way news journal to rescind charter changes that allow each entity to elect its own trustees. The five agencies filed amended charters with the Missouri Secretary of State in 2000 and 2001.

Messengers also amended the constitution to turn the temporary credentials committee into a standing committee. The new committee will operate under guidelines that spell out the rules a congregation must follow to be considered a cooperating church.

Although the convention's constitution does not list a financial requirement for membership, the committee's guidelines note that a church will be considered singly aligned if it contributes to the convention "at least on an annual basis" and does not belong to or financially support another state convention or organization that "serves and/or acts as a state convention" in Missouri.

The Missouri Baptist Convention will consider a church as cooperating with another body if that church sends representatives to the organization's meetings, financially supports its work or includes the organization in the church's budget.

A church also must be a cooperating Southern Baptist church, which the Missouri convention defines as adopting a doctrinal statement in line with accepted faith and practice, contributing financially to the SBC, and refraining from participating with or contributing to another national convention.

The guidelines define a national convention as any organization that can independently endorse chaplains to U.S. military service branches. Under that definition, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and some state conventions, such as the Baptist General Convention of Texas, would be considered national conventions, although neither CBF nor state conventions consider themselves as such.

Under the guidelines, the credentials committee would be able to investigate the qualifications of churches and of individual messengers if either is challenged. The committee also could investigate "upon receipt or discovery of any information which causes the committee to believe" a church or individual does not qualify.

At the annual session, messengers also:

Adopted a \$17 million budget. The first 1 percent is designated to promote the Cooperative Program. The remaining \$16,879,500 will be split 35.75 percent for Southern Baptist causes and 64.25 percent to remain in the state.

- ◆ Adopted nine resolutions, including resolutions to oppose embryonic stem-cell research, human cloning and eminent domain claims on churches and other ministries, and resolutions supporting New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, calling for religious liberty in Romania, and urging parents and churches to monitor children's educations.

Greg Warner of Associated Baptist Press contributed to this article.

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