

N.C. Baptists make sharp right turn

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WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP)- North Carolina Baptists' hard right turn clearly appears to be picking up steam.

As recently as two years ago, control of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, once a moderate stronghold, was in doubt. But after losing a string of elections, most moderate Baptists have tired of defending the denominational battleground.

Meanwhile, emboldened fundamentalists have made several moves recently to flex their newfound muscle:

Impatient with a search process that could take 16 months to hire a new executive director, ultra-conservatives are moving to replace the convention's interim director with one clearly identified with their movement.

- ◆ A new proposal would further tighten membership restrictions to exclude churches that accept gays as members or support organizations that condone homosexual behavior, creating perhaps the most specific ban of gay-friendly churches in Southern Baptist life.

- ◆ Another proposal in the works would stop the convention from counting money churches send to support the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship as Cooperative Program giving. And a more drastic approach to do away with all four of the convention's alternative giving plans—returning to a traditional SBC-only budget—also is being proposed.

- ◆ In July, nominees to trustee positions in the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina were rejected because they are members of churches affiliated with the Alliance of Baptists, a national organization conservatives say has a “pro-homosexual stance.”

- ◆ Fundamentalists rejected several candidates for the board of the Biblical Recorder, the convention's newspaper, and replaced them with hard-liners. The nominating committee's chairman said the newspaper was singled out because it needs to become “more conservative.”

Anticipating even more contentious times ahead, the five colleges and universities that relate to the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina recently asked the convention for a formal study of its legal relationships with the schools. Such a study could lead to severing ties between the convention and some of the schools—Campbell University, Chowan College, Gardner-Webb University, Mars Hill College and Wingate University.

North Carolina Baptists of all stripes are pointing to the annual convention meeting Nov. 14-16, which will vote on many of the conservatives' proposals, as a pivotal event. But while that prospect motivated moderates to action in years past, it has generated more resignation than talk of revolution.

Moderates are not even fielding a candidate for convention president this year. Conservative Stan Welch, pastor of Blackwelder Park Baptist Church in Kannapolis, is the only candidate to emerge so far.

Already, conservatives are acting to counter any apathy that might arise among their followers because of the moderate concession.

“The fight's not over,” Bill Sanderson, president of Conservative Carolina Baptists, told a rally at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary Oct. 20, one of three scheduled across the state. “We can't say we don't need to be at the convention this year.”

Greg Mathis, a former convention president and a current member of the budget committee, told the group the practice of counting CBF money that is channeled through the North Carolina budget as Cooperative Program funding is a top complaint among conservatives.

But Mathis urged attendees to support the modest CBF-related budget change rather than do away with all four alternative budgets—which would leave the convention with a single plan that sends 35 percent of church contributions to the SBC. Such a surgical, precise approach to the budget is preferable to the “chainsaw approach,” because doing away with all four plans might have unintended consequences, he said.

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