

SBC evangelism lags due to lack of effort, Welch insists_62705

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Newly elected officers of the Southern Baptist Convention are, front row from left, Jerry Sutton, pastor of Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., first vice president; Bobby Welch, pastor of First Baptist Church in Daytona Beach, Fla., re-elected president; Roy Fish, evangelism professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, second vice president; and, back row from left, Jim Wells, director of missions for the Tri-County Baptist Association, Ozark, Mo., re-elected registration secretary; and John Yeats, editor of the Oklahoma Messenger, re-elected recording secretary. (Photo by Matt Miller/BP)

SBC evangelism lags due to lack of effort, Welch insists

By Greg Warner

Associated Baptist Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP)—Southern Baptists aren't lagging behind in evangelism due to all the attention they give to issues of public morality, Bobby Welch told reporters after his re-election as Southern Baptist Convention president. Instead, a lack of effort and “unity of purpose” keeps Southern Baptists from realizing their evangelistic potential.

Welch, pastor of First Baptist Church of Daytona Beach, Fla., spent his first year as president urging Southern Baptists to confront flagging evangelism, pointing to a drop in total baptisms during four of the last five years. During a press conference after his June 21 election, he discussed how Southern Baptists balance activism on social issues, which have kept Southern Baptists in the news in recent years, with evangelism, which he and others say has been the SBC's historic hallmark.

During the convention, messengers adopted resolutions about public-school morality, stem-cell research, judicial activism and other hot topics.

Asked if such social issues are distracting Southern Baptists from witnessing, Welch told reporters, “I don't think so. In fact, I almost wish it were true, because I would know how to come at it. They just don't do it anymore.”

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“Lack of effort” is the reason baptisms have dropped off in SBC churches, and the slump can be overcome by working harder, he said. “A lot of pastors are looking for a drive-thru window” where they can order a simple solution to the evangelism challenge, Welch said. “It's hard work.”

In fact, he said, evangelism and political action complement each other. “If you get involved in people's lives personally, you'll be concerned” with their public lives. He pointed out the 10,000 volunteers who worked in the pre-convention Crossover witnessing effort in Nashville went door-to-door “looking for ministry needs,” not merely for lost souls.

Of those Southern Baptists involved in political action, Welch said, “I'm not calling them to give it up.” But he added, “Political leaders are not going to do our work for us.” Changing laws won't produce more Christians, he suggested. “We're here to change society by changing people.”

While political action is not a distraction for Southern Baptists, Welch said, “that political stuff is a lot easier than the spiritual stuff.” Doing the hard work of evangelism and getting involved in people's lives attracts a lot of criticism, he suggested. “You can catch nothing but trouble doing what we're doing.”

Although evangelism is a bottom-line commitment of Southern Baptists—“you can hardly find a lower common denominator”—the convention nonetheless lacks “that unity of purpose” that will maximize its evangelistic potential. “We are stifling and slouching along ... because we are not creating spiritual synergy,” he said. “We need something to force us to come together on a quest.”

Southern Baptists elected another pastor and an evangelist to their other top offices. Jerry Sutton, pastor of Two Rivers Baptist Church in the host city of Nashville, was elected first vice president with 72 percent of the vote in a runoff with Dan Spencer, pastor of First Baptist Church of

Thomasville, Ga.

Roy Fish, professor of evangelism at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth for more than 40 years, was elected second vice president with 80 percent of the vote.

In electing Fish, messengers turned back the nomination of Wiley Drake, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Buena Park, Calif., who has become well known to messengers as a frequent maker of motions and resolutions during the annual convention.

Two other officers were re-elected—James Wells, a director of missions from Nixa, Mo., as registration secretary, and John Yeats of Oklahoma City, Okla., editor of the Oklahoma Baptist, as recording secretary.

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