Thousands witness eight local church baptisms during SBC annual meeting_62705

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Gordon Donahoe, right, pastor of Donelson View Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., baptizes Rodney Kelly, 22, June 21 as more than 11,000 messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention watch and applaud. Kelly, who recently returned from a tour of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, made a profession of faith in Christ during a premarital counseling session with Donahoe. Since members of 10,000 SBC churches did not see anyone baptized last year, SBC leaders decided to feature a baptism at each session of the SBC annual meeting, in Nashville's Gaylord Entertainment Center June 21-22.

Thousands witness eight local church baptisms during SBC annual meeting

By Jennifer Davis Rash

The Alabama Baptist

NASHVILLE—Southern Baptists might not remember Luke Charlton, but the 7-year-old from Nashville always will remember the 16-million member Baptist body.

The first person to experience a local church baptism in front of thousands of Southern Baptists from across the nation—at least in recent memory—Charlton was baptized by his pastor during the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in Nashville June 21–22.
Jim Cross, pastor of First Baptist Church, Donelson, Tenn., where Charlton is now a member, said, "I told Luke that for about an hour and a half he could say that he was the only person ever baptized at the Southern Baptist Convention, then after that he would have to adjust it slightly to say he was the first person ever baptized at the Southern Baptist Convention."

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Charlton was one of eight candidates for baptism from five Nashville-area churches who agreed to allow Southern Baptists to peek into their churches' observance of this local church ordinance.

Eric Kilby, now a member of Hermitage Hills Baptist Church in Hermitage, Tenn., said, "The purpose of baptism is to display obedience. Why do it in front of 1,000 when you can do it in front of 10,000?"

Kilby and his wife, Julie, were baptized in the Wednesday evening session of the annual meeting.

During each session of the convention, a different church held its baptism in a five-minute slot on the program. Descriptions such as "awesome," "exciting," and "It's a God thing" flowed from the mouths of SBC messengers, members of the churches that held the baptisms and those baptized.

Julie Kilby said it was something she always would remember. "It was special. It was neat to look out and see that many Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ."

Cross explained that the local churches performed the baptisms, not the SBC. It was a local church event that was being held on the convention floor.

“For those few moments, the SBC is joining us as a family for that celebration,” he said. “We are not joining the convention.”

Each baptism was conducted with the approval and support of the sponsoring home church. And members of each church were present to serve as witnesses.

“It was fantastic to be part of history,” said Cross, who organized the baptism segment at the annual meeting.

Cross said he did experience apprehension from several pastors as he contacted them to participate. “Naturally this is a new thing and some polity issues came up,” Cross noted. “But once I explained that the local church service just happens to be there at the convention, they were on board.”

As Cross organized the baptisms, he worked with the four other pastors to insure a variety of baptismal candidates. “We had a child, a senior adult, a young married couple, some raised in church and some who just came into church, Cross said. Two of the three people baptized by Phil Gruita, pastor of Ivy Memorial Baptist Church in Nashville, came to Christ during Crossover Nashville June 18.

“Sharing the gospel, seeing people saved and baptizing, this is really what we are about,” Cross said. “This was a great way to be able to say (that).”

SBC President Bobby Welch added the baptism segment to the 2005 annual meeting as a way to depict the challenge he launched June 22, which is to “witness, win and baptize 1 million” in one year.

“Baptism is that huge, first giant step toward discipleship,” Welch said. “For some, this was the first baptism they had seen in at least 12 months.”

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