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GREENSBORO, N.C. (ABP) —Blogs already have revolutionized secular politics, and whether a subset of it has revolutionized Baptist politics will be seen at the Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting June 13-14 in Greensboro, N.C.

The meeting will feature the first seriously contested SBC presidential election in a decade and several other controversial business items. The combination likely will produce the most contentious convention meeting since 1991, when moderates left after a long and bitter struggle with fundamentalists over control of the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

But this time, the struggle is between young conservatives and fundamentalists loyal to the convention establishment. Internal tensions have been thrust into the SBC spotlight mainly by bloggers—the ever-expanding network of ideological entrepreneurs who analyze and elaborate on their own websites.

In the year since the SBC last met, reform-minded bloggers in the denomination have begun to form their own community on the Internet—and they have had a lot to discuss.

Since 2005's annual meeting, Southern Baptists have witnessed:

- The top executives at one of their mission boards resign amid scandal.
- The president of another SBC mission board embroiled in conflict with trustees.
- An unprecedented attempt by those trustees to remove one of their colleagues.
- A decline in the number of baptisms among the denomination's churches.

Presidential race

For the first time since 1994, a candidate for SBC president other than one anointed by the denomination's leadership elite has a serious chance at being elected SBC president.

The first announced nominee, Ronnie Floyd, apparently has the support of many of the denomination's most powerful leaders—including one of the architects of the fundamentalists' SBC takeover.

Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church in Springdale, Ark., has received endorsements from three seminary presidents—a move SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman publicly deemed inappropriate. Some critics have said the unusual moves could signal desperation on the part of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary President Paige Patterson and other fundamentalist leaders, who are accustomed to their friends and allies being elected to denominational leadership positions without challenge.

Many of the bloggers have criticized Floyd's weak support of the Cooperative Program, the SBC's unified budget for supporting denominational ministries at the national and state levels.

In 2005, Floyd's church gave 0.27 percent of its \$12 million in undesignated funds to the Cooperative Program.

Frank Page, pastor of First Baptist Church of Taylors, S.C., was courted as a candidate by prominent SBC blogger Wade Burleson and other reform-minded conservatives. Last year, Page's church gave 12.1 percent of its \$4.4 million in undesignated receipts to the Cooperative Program.

Jerry Sutton, pastor of Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., also is running for president. He has been endorsed by three fundamentalist activists—Bill Streich of the Texas Baptist Laymen's Association, Roger Moran of the Missouri Baptist Laymen's Association and Larry Reagan of Concerned Tennessee Baptists. William Maxwell, administrative director for the Tennessee Baptist Convention, reported Two Rivers gave \$73,627.87 to the Tennessee Cooperative Program—1.7 percent of undesignated receipts. Baptist Press reported the church gave \$183,482—4.5 percent—to state and national Cooperative Program missions.

Baptism decline

During his tenure, SBC President Bobby Welch emphasized revitalization of SBC evangelism, challenging Southern Baptists to convert and baptize 1 million new Christians from October 2005 through September 2006—a program called "Everyone Can."

Despite the grassroots effort, statistics from the SBC's 2005 survey of member congregations reveal a decline in baptisms for the fifth time in six years. The annual statistics show baptisms last year dropped from 387,947

to 371,850—a 4.15 percent drop.

The decrease of more than 16,000 baptisms came after a gain of 10,000-plus baptisms the previous year. But that gain was preceded by four consecutive years of baptism declines, decreasing from more than 419,000 baptisms in 1998-99.

More importantly, the baptism figures reflect little change over the past 50 years, with the numbers of baptisms holding relatively steady while the denomination's overall membership figure has continued to rise. This is despite the fact that one of fundamentalists' main rallying cries in gaining control of the SBC was that the moderates who previously ran the denomination were insufficiently evangelistic.

Vice-presidential races

The first vice presidential contest could be a four-way race that pits a neo-Calvinist against an evangelist and two pastors.

Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., and a popular leader among SBC Calvinists, acknowledged he would allow himself to be nominated for the VP post.

Keith Fordham, an evangelist from Fayetteville, Ga., also will run for the slot. Fordham is the former president of the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists. Baptist Press reported June 2 that Jimmy Jackson, pastor of Whitesburg Baptist Church in Huntsville, Ala., also will be nominated for the post. He is a trustee at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, a former SBC Executive Committee member and has served as an SBC parliamentarian. Four days later, Kelly Burris, pastor of Kempsville Baptist Church in Virginia Beach, Va., announced he will be nominated for the position by Terry Fox, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Wichita, Kan. Burris serves on the executive committee of the

Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia.

Messengers also will have a choice in the race for second vice president. North Carolina pastor J.D. Greear, California pastor Wiley Drake and Louisiana pastor Jay Adkins have said they will be nominated for the position of second vice president.

Bloggers and the mission board

The advent of the SBC blogo-sphere has brought pre-existing internal tensions in the denomination to the surface. Many of the bloggers are under 50—young by the standards of Baptist leadership—and there is a generational aspect to the conflict in the denomination.

In recent years, SBC officials have worked to cultivate younger pastors and other leaders, and to bring them into service on denominational boards and offices. But the plan may have backfired to some extent, since some of the new recruits are leading the revolution against the old-guard establishment.

The small but influential group has attacked everything from controversial new restrictions on missionaries to perceived cronyism among trustees.

Burleson probably is the most widely read of the new SBC bloggers, whose ranks also include Georgia pastor Marty Duren and Texas pastor Benjamin Cole. He started his blog as a way to criticize actions taken by a majority of his fellow trustees at the International Mission Board. Trustees attempted to remove the Enid, Okla., pastor after he refused to stop discussing controversial new board policies online.

The move—had it been approved by SBC messengers—reportedly would have been the first time an SBC agency trustee was forced out of office in the middle of a term. After a firestorm of Internet and newspaper

controversy over the move, trustees backed down, instead barring Burleson from serving on any IMB committees and adopting rules prohibiting trustees and staff from dissenting publicly from any board decisions.

Burleson agreed to live under those restrictions, but during a subsequent trustee meeting, Chairman Tom Hatley announced Burleson again had violated the secrecy of a closed-door trustee session May 22 by blogging about a proposed task force that would study doctrinal qualifications for IMB missionaries.

As punishment for Burleson's "breach of confidentiality," the board's executive committee barred him from attending any future closed-door sessions of the board and recommended that its newly elected chairman continue that prohibition. Burleson said he will refuse to abide by those restrictions unless they are ratified by the SBC.

Burleson has promised to present a motion during the annual meeting calling for a denominational ad hoc committee to investigate various allegations of improper conduct by his fellow IMB trustees, Patterson and other SBC leaders. While many such motions are made annually at SBC meetings, they almost always are ruled out of order or referred to the agency they concern, with a report expected by the following annual meeting. However, Burleson has said he may invoke a rule that will force the convention to vote on the motion at that meeting—although it requires a supermajority for approval.

North American Mission Board woes

As for the SBC's other missionary agency, the North American Mission Board, President Bob Reccord resigned April 17 after a trustee investigation produced a scathing report of numerous examples of poor management. Allegations of massive waste, cronyism and other troubles under Reccord's leadership first surfaced in a February expose by Georgia

Baptists' newspaper, The Christian Index.

The investigation faulted Reccord for autocratic decision-making, extravagant spending on failed projects, apparent conflicts of interest and creating a “culture of fear” that prevented staffers from questioning the abuses. It also said Reccord spent resources on projects unrelated to NAMB's mission and was gone so much he couldn't adequately manage the agency, which directs and coordinates Southern Baptist mission work in the United States and Canada.

Public schools

In addition to the internal unrest, messengers attending the meeting—the Greensboro Con-vention and Visitor's Bureau expects more than 12,000 of them—may address a resolution on staging a mass exodus from public schools.

For the third SBC annual meeting in a row, Texas attorney Bruce Shortt will attempt to place the denomination on record calling for Christians to remove their children from public schools. His previous resolutions have been quashed or heavily altered by the SBC Resolutions Committee. At last year's meeting, the committee stopped short of including Shortt's call for a public-school boycott. In 2004, SBC messengers rejected a Shortt proposal urging Southern Baptists to remove their children from “godless” and “anti-Christian” public schools.

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