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By Greg Warner

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GREENSBORO, S.C. (ABP)—In a major populist upset, Frank Page of South Carolina was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention over two candidates closely tied to the SBC's fundamentalist power structure.

Page, who described his election as a victory for grassroots Baptists, was elected with 50.48 percent of the vote on a first ballot over two high-profile leaders in the fundamentalist-dominated SBC.

Frank Page

Jerry Sutton, pastor of Two Rivers Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., received 2,168 votes, or 24.08 percent. Ronnie Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church of Springdale, Ark., received 2,247 votes, or 24.95 percent. Page, pastor of First Baptist Church in Taylors, S.C., and former pastor of Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth, received 4,546 votes—just 65 more than necessary for a first-ballot victory.

Page's election signaled a defeat for the SBC's powerbrokers, who have hand-picked all but one president since 1979. Only Jim Henry of Orlando—elected in 1994 and 1995—lacked the endorsement of the SBC's leaders.

Floyd lost despite the endorsement of three SBC seminary presidents, including Paige Patterson, the SBC's most powerful leader. Sutton reportedly had the support of Paul Pressler, another SBC fundamentalist architect.

The surprise election also reflected grassroots dissatisfaction with officers who direct the SBC's work but offer little financial support to its central missions budget, the Cooperative Program. Page's church contributes 12.1 percent of its 2005 undesignated receipts to the Cooperative Program. Floyd's church gave 0.27 percent of undesignated receipts to the Cooperative Program in 2005 and an additional 1.6 percent to other SBC causes. Sutton's church gave nothing to the CP in 2005 but sent 2.7 percent to SBC causes.

After his election, Page, 53, said he would seek to create a more open Southern Baptist Convention, but added: "I'm not trying to undo a conservative movement that I have supported all these years."

He said he would continue the trend of appointing leaders who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible but who also have "a sweet spirit."

"I'm an inerrantist. I believe in the word of God. I'm just not mad about it," Page said in a post-election news conference.

Page's supporters said their candidate benefited from the participation of messengers previously uninvolved in convention life. "This election is about the people being heard," said Wade Burleson, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Okla.

“It’s no longer kingmakers; it’s the people,” he said.

Burleson, a trustee of the International Mission Board who has argued against exclusivistic tactics of that agency, was himself considered a possible candidate for president. But his influence, plus that of other Southern Baptist bloggers, was credited with energizing support for Page and for a broadening of SBC leadership.

Page agreed the bloggers, a new phenomenon in SBC politics, made a difference. While the bloggers are few in number, he said: “I think there are a large number of leaders who do read those blogs. I think they played a role beyond their number—perhaps an inordinant amount of influence given their number—but they are a growing phenomenon in Southern Baptist life.”

Page is a graduate of Gardner-Webb University in North Carolina and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Other officers elected were first vice president, Jimmy Jackson of Huntsville, Ala.; second vice president, Wiley Drake of Buena Park, Calif.; recording secretary John Yeats of Monroe, La.; and registration secretary, Jim Well, of Nixa, Mo.

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