

SBC annual meeting attendance expected to jump this year

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GREENSBORO, N.C. (ABP) — After a decade of steady decline, attendance at the Southern Baptist Convention is expected to jump this year, amid ripples of unrest with the current leadership and the first openly contested presidential election since 1994.

Several estimates suggest at least 10,000 Southern Baptist messengers are charting a course for Greensboro, N.C., where the SBC annual meeting will be held June 13-14. But if interest continues to grow in the final weeks, there could be several thousand more.

Fewer than 10,000 messengers registered between 2001 and 2004 before attendance jumped to 11,641 for the 2005 convention in the SBC's home city of Nashville. That's a far cry from the 40,000 that attended during the height of the conservative-moderate conflict of the 1980s.

Since the Nashville meeting, however, Southern Baptists have witnessed the top executives of one mission board resign amid scandal, the other

mission board president embroiled in conflict with trustees, the threatened first-ever removal of one of those trustees, a statistical decline getting progressively worse, and the emergence of a network of reform-minded bloggers protesting the “exclusionary” tactics of the SBC leadership.

Southern Baptist leaders rightfully claim some positive momentum too, such as the national recognition that followed the SBC’s disaster-relief work after Hurricane Katrina.

But there’s no denying the growing unrest stirring among some Southern Baptists, who expected more from the conservative movement that has held the convention’s reins for 27 years. Now, for the first time since moderates withdrew more than a decade ago, there is talk of party politics and busing church members to the convention next month.

“Angry conservatives will show up to vote; status-quo conservatives are complacent and staying home,” said one longtime SBC observer. It “could be a close vote.”

Conflict centers on the contest for SBC president. Arkansas pastor Ronnie Floyd is running with the support of the conservative establishment. Floyd is expected to face opposition, but so far no candidate has emerged.

Ronnie Floyd, pastor of the largest Southern Baptist church in Arkansas, and Frank Page, a South Carolina pastor with a record of strong financial support of the denomination’s budget, each will be nominated for SBC president at the annual convention.

Floyd is the favorite of the SBC’s established leadership, which has controlled the presidency for 27 years. Page was recruited by a group of Southern Baptist young conservatives who say the convention’s establishment is excluding too many people.

It’s too early to predict the attendance in Greensboro, much less the

outcome. Most churches don't select their messengers, or delegates, until the final weeks.

SBC officials downplay expectations of a significant increase over last year. Registration secretary Jim Wells of Branson, Mo., said he expects to see 10,000-12,000 messengers in Greensboro, and a total attendance of 14,000-16,000.

The prediction from the Greensboro Convention and Visitor's Bureau is higher—12,000-14,000 messengers, with a total of 18,000 or more visiting the city for the meeting.

Those who decide late could have serious difficulty finding a place to sleep in Greensboro, where hotel rooms have been booked solid for months. The convention bureau assisted SBC officials in obtaining 4,500 rooms in Greensboro—all that were available—and also helped locate additional rooms outside of Greensboro.

Statistics released following the Nashville convention showed that nearly 83 percent of the messengers drove to the meeting last year. Greensboro, like Nashville, is located in an area that is thick with Southern Baptist churches and linked by several major highways. A large number of drive-in messengers could easily make the trip, and their response is likely to determine whether the attendance is one to remember.

Online pre-registration through the SBC web site is tracking about the same as for last year's meeting in Nashville, Wells said. Among messengers attending the 2005 meeting, 7,416 had pre-registered, nearly two-thirds of the total. Another 1,809 persons pre-registered, but did not attend.

Wells declined to release information about what parts of the country are producing the most pre-registrations. "It would not be a true picture," he said, "because many churches wait until their May business meeting to elect messengers."

Wells said he expects a surge in online registrations during the last week before the convention.

SBC officials in Nashville are preparing for the prospect that the messenger count could be higher than anticipated. Donald Magee, SBC associate vice president for finance, is overseeing preparations for the registration area at the Greensboro coliseum.

“There is no way to tell exactly how many folks are coming,” he said, “so we have to prepare more than enough materials.”

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