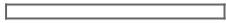


Planned 2008 convocation grows from desire for a new Baptist voice

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Former
Presidents

Jimmy
Carter (at
podium)
and Bill
Clinton
(behind
him) with
Mercer
University
President

Bill
Underwood
(right)
introduce a
gathering
of more
than 30
Baptist
leaders at
The Carter
Center. The
group is
calling for a
convocation
of Baptists
next year.
(CBF Photo
by Billy
Howard)

Planned 2008 convocation grows from desire for 'new Baptist voice'

By Robert Marus & Greg Warner

Associated Baptist Press

ATLANTA (ABP)—The nation's two living Baptist ex-presidents have called for a historic convocation in Atlanta next year, intended to improve the negative image of Baptists in North America and unite the majority of Baptists into a loose-knit network to address social ills.

President Jimmy Carter and President Bill Clinton will announce the 2008 convocation in a Jan. 9 press conference in Atlanta, following a meeting of about 80 diverse Baptist leaders at the [Carter Presidential Center](#).

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The 2008 convocation is a result of Carter's initiative to create a new

Baptist “voice” to counter what he and others say is a negative and judgmental image of Baptists in North America.

Last April, many of the same Baptist leaders signed the [North American Baptist Covenant](#) to counter the often-combative pronouncements of many of the nation’s most prominent Baptist leaders. That meeting included representatives of the [Baptist World Alliance](#), [American Baptist Churches](#), [National Baptist Convention USA](#), [Canadian Baptist Ministries](#), [Cooperative Baptist Fellowship](#) and other groups.

The covenant expressed the participants’ “desire to speak and work together to create an authentic and genuine prophetic Baptist voice in these complex times.”

It also reaffirmed their commitment to “traditional Baptist values, including sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ and its implications for public and private morality.”

Organizers expect the convocation, to be held Jan. 30 to Feb. 1, 2008, to draw more than 20,000 Baptist participants from throughout the United States and Canada.

Bill Underwood, president of Baptist-affiliated [Mercer University](#), helped Carter organize the April 2006 summit and the Jan. 9 press conference. He told Baptist leaders he hopes the 2008 convocation will be a way to draw attention away from “the Baptists who have the microphone” currently.

Underwood—former interim president of Baylor University—said the only image most North Americans have of Baptists comes from ultra-conservative leaders who frequently appear on television news shows or other media. They represent some of the most negative rhetoric, most conservative political views and most fundamentalist theology among the broad range of Baptist denominations and congregations.

“They are increasingly defining the Baptist witness in North America,” he said.

“North America desperately needs a true Baptist witness,” Underwood told leaders of the 30-plus Baptist denominational entities, which range from conservative to progressive. “There’s no organization in this room that has a strong enough voice ... but the organizations in this room together do have a strong enough voice.”

Baptists need to be known for feeding the hungry, healing the sick and working for justice, Underwood said.

The organizations represented by meeting participants comprise about 20 million Baptists in North America, the event’s organizers noted. That’s more than the 16 million members claimed by the [Southern Baptist Convention](#), the largest Baptist group in the world, whose leaders have moved sharply to the political and theological right in the last 25 years.

While official SBC representatives have not been involved in the Carter initiative so far, organizers say they hope the convocation can include SBC leaders and other conservatives who are open to working with an array of Baptists more ideologically diverse than the denomination’s leadership.

Carter and Clinton, both of whom will speak at the 2008 convocation, have identified with more progressive Baptist groups, but organizers said the convocation will include conservative speakers as well.

In the April meeting, Carter, a former Southern Baptist, said he feels a need to create such a voice because of the schism the SBC experienced in the 1980s.

“The most common opinion about Baptists is we cannot get along. ... I have been grieved by the divisions of my own convention,” he said at the time.

Carter has been a longtime member, deacon and Sunday school teacher at Maranatha Baptist Church in his hometown of Plains, Ga. The church recently ordained his wife, Rosalynn, as a deacon—a move many Southern Baptist leaders oppose.

Clinton has recently joined Carter in lending his star power to the pan-Baptist effort. Although he attended Washington's Foundry United Methodist Church with his Methodist wife, Hillary, during his years in the White House, Clinton is a longtime member of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark.

Editor Marv Knox contributed to this story.

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