

Abundant field of SBC candidates may signal relaxed political reins

May 20, 2008

INDIANAPOLIS (ABP)—Candidates are lining up two-by-two for this year's Southern Baptist Convention presidency, like animals filing into Noah's Ark—two big-church pastors, two small-church pastors, two former missionaries.

For the first time in almost three decades, six men will be nominated for the presidency of the Southern Baptist Convention, to be held June 10-11 in Indianapolis.

Johnny
Hunt



Avery
Willis

Not since the first year of the SBC's fundamentalist movement in 1979 have six nominees been offered for the annual presidential election, which for the subsequent 12 years was a showdown between two warring factions and later was dominated by the victorious conservatives.

In their first victory in that succession, fundamentalists nominated one candidate—Memphis megachurch pastor Adrian Rogers—against five moderate or local candidates.

This year, all six candidates support the three-decade-long movement.

Nature of election has changed

But the nature of the election has changed, said Oklahoma pastor and prominent Baptist blogger Wade Burleson.

"In the past, the presidency was all about prestige," Burleson said. "If you had prestige, were a megachurch pastor, and waited your turn, you could be elected. Those days are over."

- **Two of the 2008 candidates fit the mold** of most presidents since 1979—well-known megachurch pastors, although in recent years the megachurches have gotten smaller and the pastors less famous.

In this case, both are from metro Atlanta. Frank Cox, pastor of North Metro Baptist Church in Lawrenceville, Ga., and Johnny Hunt, senior pastor of First Baptist Church in Woodstock, Ga., are both closely associated with the SBC's power structure. Cox and Hunt were on trips to Israel and unavailable for comment for this story.

- **Two candidates are small-church pastors** who would qualify as SBC outsiders and—if history is a guide—long-shots for the presidency. Wiley Drake is pastor of the 75-member First Southern Baptist Church in Buena Park, Calif. Les Puryear, a North Carolina native who was a telecommunications executive for 25 years before entering the pastorate in 1996, serves Lewisville (N.C.) Baptist Church, with an average attendance of 195.



Wiley
Drake



William
Wagner

Both Drake and Puryear are better known than most small-church pastors. Drake served as SBC second vice president and is a mainstay at the annual meeting, proposing the famous boycott of Disney because of questionable programming and support of gay rights. Puryear was organizer of the SBC's first Small Church Leadership Conference in March.

- **Two candidates were career Southern Baptist missionaries.** Bill Wagner, a 72-year-old seminary professor and current president of Olivet University International in San Francisco, served the SBC International Mission Board from 1965 to 1996. Avery Willis, former senior vice president of overseas operations for the IMB and author of the popular MasterLife discipleship curriculum, served 15 years as head of adult discipleship for LifeWay Christian Resources before retiring to Arkansas.

Like Drake, Wagner served as SBC second vice president, in 2004.

The unusual election this year is being played out against a backdrop of decline in the country's second-largest religious group. For the first time in history, the 16 million-member Southern Baptist Convention posted a decline in membership last year, after several years of baptism losses and other signs of slumping vitality.

The statistics belie the battle cry of conservatives, that seizing control of the denominational hierarchy would prevent a slide into liberal-inspired lethargy, the graveyard of mainline denominations.

Less concern about control?

The abundant field of candidates—and their less-than-obvious political alignment—has prompted speculation that Southern Baptist conservatives are now so comfortable with their hold on the convention that they are less concerned about who holds the powerful office, which was the centerpiece of the strategy used to steer the SBC onto a rightward course.

Les
Puryear

Frank
Cox

Another interpretation, however, suggests that the convention's powerbrokers are promoting a more-the-merrier strategy in hopes of assuring at least one sympathetic candidate makes it into a runoff.

Burleson, a leader among younger SBC conservatives, took the less cynical interpretation, welcoming the burgeoning field.

"I think it's healthy when there are a lot of different candidates," said the pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid. He said there are "good choices" among the six announced candidates.

And he hinted the field may grow even larger. "When was the last time there were six, maybe seven, maybe eight candidates for president?" he asked. "There is a possibility [of more nominees], but it's not for certain."

The presidential winner will succeed South Carolina pastor Frank Page, who was elected with help from Burleson and other bloggers who advocated relaxing denominational control and spreading leadership around. Their goal is to broaden SBC involvement, innovation and inclusiveness in order to increase cooperation and turn around declining statistics.

The issues

"The issue is no longer who is president, but what are the issues?" Burleson continued. The issues are denominational cooperation, local-church autonomy and "resurgence of the gospel," said Burleson.

The pastor promised there would be motions introduced at the June convention related to those issues—“either to stop progress or move it along.”

Burleson did not announce his favorite among the six nominees but said electing a small-church pastor “would represent a voice in the SBC that has not been heard.”

Puryear is an advocate for the SBC’s helping small churches, which he said represent 83 percent of the convention’s churches.

“Historically, the SBC has been a convention of small churches led by megachurch leaders,” he said in an e-mail interview. “I have nothing against those in megachurches. However, I don’t think they understand the needs of the small church and its members and leaders as well as someone who ministers in that environment each day.”

Smaller churches being heard

Puryear admitted small-church pastors have not fared well in previous presidential elections. “I do know that now more than ever before I am hearing the small church included in convention discussions,” he said.

Puryear likewise welcomed the multitude of nominees. And he added, “Indianapolis will reveal whether the election of Frank Page was a true shift in the SBC or just a bump in the road for the establishment.”

In what has to be a first in SBC history, one candidate interviewed another about the SBC election on live radio May 15.

Drake, who hosts a daily radio show in Southern California that is also webcast on the Internet, interviewed fellow Californian Wagner.

The interview focused more on the candidates’ agreements than

differences, and Drake pledged to support Wagner if the mission leader is elected. Wagner said the SBC should develop a program to recruit and send out college students for two-year stints as missionaries, with the individuals, their families and their churches supporting them financially.

He also advocated creating a convention department to relate to the secular media. Baptist Press, the denomination's information arm, "does an outstanding job" of communicating with Southern Baptists but "a miserable job" with secular media, Wagner said.

"There is no apparatus to let people know who we are and the tremendous things we're doing," Wagner said, to Drake's "amens." Wagner, who has a website promoting his candidacy, added Southern Baptists are "behind on using the Internet."

At the interview's conclusion, Drake said of Wagner: "I agree with his presidential platform and will do everything I can to assist him ... if he is elected."

"Contract with Southern Baptists"

Wagner, on his website (www.williamwagner.org), offers a "Contract with Southern Baptists" that advocates the "conservative resurgence," expanding SBC involvement to include all conservatives, supporting the SBC mission boards, learning about world religions, deploying college students in missions, rebuilding relationships with national Baptist unions around the world, and involving younger Baptists, small churches and minority churches in SBC life.

Drake is emphasizing the spiritual dimension of his presidency, promising to promote "repentance and revival" in SBC churches and in America and to lead Southern Baptists to increase denominational cooperation and

influence the social order - particularly as it concerns government "intimidation" of preachers.

"Win, lose or draw, I'm going to take on" the American Civil Liberties Union, he pledged in an interview.

Drake, who supported Page's election, said he is "one of the few candidates who can make changes" needed in the SBC. "If we don't make those changes, we're going to be in deep, deep trouble."

Avery Willis, who also promotes his candidacy on a website (www.averywillis.com), said his presidency will stress the spiritual needs of Southern Baptists.

"The thing I see missing most in the churches I visit is God," he said.

If elected, he would "talk about whatever it means to be a disciple," said the longtime proponent of personal discipleship. Denominational emphasis on revival and evangelism is important, he said, "but it's not going to turn around the situation of 70 percent of our churches being stagnant or declining."

"I will be calling for a spiritual returning to God on a personal level and a congregational level."