

Former SBC President Bailey Smith dies

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DULUTH, Ga. (BP)—Evangelist Bailey Smith, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, died Jan. 14 at his home in Duluth, Ga. He was 79.



Bailey Smith

Smith was elected SBC president in 1980, one year after Memphis pastor Adrian Rogers' election signaled the beginning of what supporters called the "conservative resurgence" and critics called the "fundamentalist takeover" of the convention.

Gerald Harris, retired editor of Georgia Baptists' *Christian Index* newsjournal, described Smith as "a powerful preacher, devoted pastor and faithful friend" in an obituary posted Jan. 15 on the Index's website.

Harris wrote that Smith told him he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in April 2017. "I was stunned and heartbroken, but he was calm and

demonstrated an imperturbable peace at the threshold of the personal physical storm he was entering,” he wrote.

After receiving care from Atlanta-area cancer specialists, Smith went to the MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Smith and his wife Sandy remained in a Houston hotel for months for further diagnosis, chemotherapy and observation. Doctors ultimately recommended a complicated cancer surgery known as the Whipple procedure that, as Harris described it, offered “a five-year survival rate of up to 25 percent. Although the skill of the surgeon and excellent care of the hospital was commendable, the surgery was not successful.”

Sparked national controversy

Smith’s two one-year terms as SBC president were marked by his resolute preaching and by national controversy, particularly his declaration at a Religious Right gathering in Dallas that “God Almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew.”



Bailey Smith responds to reporters’ questions at the 1981 Southern Baptist Convention. (File Photo)

“For how in the world can God hear the prayer of a man who says that Jesus Christ is not the true Messiah? It is blasphemy. It may be politically expedient, but no one can pray unless he prays through the name of Jesus

Christ,” Smith told the Religious Roundtable’s National Affairs Briefing, Aug. 22, 1980.

Smith was born in Dallas on Jan. 30, 1939, the son of Bailey E. and Frances Smith. He graduated from Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Ark., in 1961 and from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth in 1966.

Smith led churches in Texas, Arkansas and New Mexico before being called, at age 34, as pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla., where he served 12 years. At the time of his election as SBC president, Smith was the youngest man ever to lead the convention.

Earlier, he had served as president of the Southern Baptist Convention Pastors’ Conference and the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma simultaneously.

‘An inerrancy superstar’

Harris wrote that *TIME* magazine described Smith as “a formidable figure, a fiery, red-haired, old style prairie stemwinder.” *Christianity Today* referred to him as “an inerrancy superstar.”

In 1980, First Southern Baptist in Del City recorded 2,000 baptisms, Harris reported.

“In the 12 years Smith was the pastor ... the membership grew from 6,600 to more than 20,000, and in a convention that was known for thriving on growth and soul-winning, Bailey Smith was known as a pacesetter,” he said.

Smith became a vocational evangelist in 1985. Bailey Smith Ministries conducted area-wide crusades, church revivals, Bible conferences, women’s retreats and overseas ministries.

Smith is survived by his wife of 55 years, Sandy, and three sons, Bailey Scott; Steven, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark.; and Josh, pastor of Prince Avenue Baptist Church in Bogart, Ga.; and eight grandchildren.