

Leadership questions continue for National Baptists

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BALTIMORE (RNS)—As the annual session of the National Baptist Convention, USA, the historically Black denomination, opened Sept. 3, the biggest question that loomed is how the meeting will end. Will it have a new president or not?

In the months leading up to the gathering at the Baltimore Convention Center, members of the National Baptist Convention have witnessed a contentious battle over who will be next to lead the group that traces its roots to 1880.



Pastor Jerry Young of Jackson, Miss., presides over a session of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. annual meeting in Baltimore. To his left are his wife, Helen Young, and Maryland Gov. Wes Moore. (RNS photo/Adelle M. Banks)

Pastor Jerry Young of New Hope Baptist Church in Jackson, Miss., has been

president for two five-year terms and cannot run for a consecutive third term under the denomination's bylaws.

Of the five candidates vying to replace Young, only one—Pastor Boise Kimber of First Calvary Baptist Church in New Haven, Conn.—was found to have received the necessary 100 endorsements from member churches and other convention entities to qualify to run for president.



Pastor Thomas Morris Sr. (Courtesy photo)

Pastor Thomas Morris Sr., chairman of the convention's election supervisory commission, said while other candidates may have gotten a sufficient number of endorsements, some of the endorsements may have come from entities that had not met their financial obligations to the denomination in recent years and are not considered in good standing.

Morris said some churches have been unable to afford their annual registration with the denomination due to lack of funds, consolidation or closure.

"Many of them did not meet that 100-vote threshold," said Morris, who also is a member of the convention's board of directors. "Dr. Boise Kimber did."

A new president is chosen by a simple-majority vote and is not elected by acclamation even if there is a sole candidate, said Morris, a Mississippi pastor.

“If no, then we go back to square one,” said Morris of the election set for Thursday. “But, if yes, then Dr. Kimber becomes the next president of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated.”

Praying for harmony

The election was briefly mentioned at the opening session in a prayer by Rodney McFarland Sr. of Louisiana, who sought divine intervention for harmony.

“God, we realize and recognize that we will elect a new leader,” he said. “Father, we know that you already have preordained this individual and we ask right now, God, whoever it might be that, God, that you will touch your people to follow leadership. Please have mercy. Keep our convention now as one.”

The opening session included welcome messages from Maryland Gov. Wes Moore and Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott, both of whom quoted Scripture in their remarks.

Scott mentioned the other presidential election on many members’ minds and voiced his support for Vice President Kamala Harris.

“Black women have saved this country from itself time and time and time and time again and it’s high time that we elect one of them to lead us,” Scott said, drawing applause from some of the thousands in the convention center.

On his campaign website, Kimber lists his goals for the denomination, describing his vision as “A Convention where Everyone is loved, united, and

committed to living out God's Word through: global missions, evangelism, discipleship development, Christian Education, and social justice."

Electoral process challenged

His opponents have mounted a unified campaign to challenge the process that eliminated them.

"Each of us as candidates in this presidential election cycle have united for a cause that surpasses our individual aspirations," said Pastor Tellis Chapman of Detroit in a four-and-a-half-minute video produced in May by the disqualified challengers. "We stand together and ask to stand with us in this fight for the soul of our convention."

Pastor Claybon Lea of San Francisco added, "We're here because member churches have followed the membership process and are being denied the right to have their recommendation letters counted and the right to cast their vote in the upcoming election."

Pastor James B. Sampson of Florida also participated in the video and continued to voice his concerns in an August Facebook post addressed to Young and convention members.

"There is no way that any candidate selected under these circumstances can legitimately govern this august body," Sampson wrote. "How can we as a convention talk about politicians when we have lost our moral compass and spiritual high ground? How can we criticize or critique anything that any secular political party is doing when it comes to voter suppression?"

Pastor Alvin Love of Chicago, who also appeared in the video, told *The Tennessean* in August the turnout at the meeting would be a factor in the outcome of the vote.

"Our biggest challenge is not Boise Kimber. And at this point, it's not even

the shenanigans of the board,” Love told the paper. “Our challenge now is building up enough excitement among our people to even want to come to Baltimore.”

Asked to respond, Morris said: “People have different persuasions, different ways to reach a same point, and sometimes just don’t see eye to eye. And I think that’s just the way it is.”

Pastor Gregory Maddox, president of United Baptist Missionary Convention and Auxiliaries of the State of Maryland Inc., which is hosting the meeting, said in an interview the week before the gathering that he hopes it will begin and end peacefully.

“I think that the process is not flawed,” he said, speaking personally and not representing his organization.

“We want it to be a unified thing,” he added. “It may be of God’s timing and not of our timing.”