

Radical change needed to stop decline in SBC, new president says

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INDIANAPOLIS—Newly elected Southern Baptist Convention President Johnny Hunt said “radical change” is needed to stop the decline in membership of the 16 million-member denomination.

During a press conference following his election on first ballot over five other candidates, Hunt said the change is needed to stop the tide of decline.

During his first press conference June 10 as the newly elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Johnny Hunt, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Ga., answers questions from the media. The election took place during the first day of the two-day SBC annual meeting at Indiana Convention Center in Indianapolis June 10 and Hunt won with 52.9 percent of the vote over five other nominees. (BP Photo by Matt Miller)

“We’ve been declining as a denomination, and you can’t turn something around until you stop the tide and direction it is going,” he said.

Hunt, pastor of First Baptist Church, Woodstock, Ga., said he hopes to have the opportunity to speak throughout the denomination and share “what has made our denomination great.” He said he also wanted to “inspire the younger generation of pastors” to “buy in” to that vision and to “step up to the plate to support it.”

What unites Southern Baptists

In response to a question as to how he can unite the convention, Hunt said he wants to hold high “the flags of what really represent Southern Baptists.”

Those flags include “being a people of the Book,” missions, and church planting.

“I hope to wrap our hearts around those things that I believe that Christ was the most committed to,” Hunt said.

He encouraged Southern Baptists not to dwell on what has divided the convention in the past. “If we keep our hearts on what has united us it will lead us to our best days in the Southern Baptist Convention,” he predicted.

Face reality

But Southern Baptists must be realistic, Hunt continued, noting that last year the convention baptized fewer people with a membership of 16 millions than the convention did in 1950 with six million members. “What’s wrong with this picture? We have a larger army (today). We ought to be taking more territory.”

When asked why the convention is showing a decline, Hunt said pastors must step to the plate and take responsibility. “We can’t blame God. We can’t blame our denominational leaders.”

“What we (pastors) find important, our people find important,” he observed.

Reach out to rising generation

Hunt also stressed the need to reach out to the younger generation. “They are not our problem. They are our future,” he said.

Noting he has been connecting with younger pastors over the past 15 years through personal contacts and a ministry to reach younger pastors sponsored by his church, Hunt said: "I connect with the younger generation. I think we will see a number of them come back to the convention.

"I am going to make myself available (to the younger generation) and I am going to hear their hearts," he pledged.

"I hope to be a conciliator for the common cause of making His name famous," Hunt added.

Part of what is needed to reach the younger generation is to stop talking about giving through the Cooperative Program, but instead showing them what is accomplished because Southern Baptists give through cooperative giving, he said.

"We try to get the offering before we get the story," Hunt said. "We need to show what is happening overseas, who is being helped, and show who is being cared for."

For the younger generation, "it oftentimes comes across that we only want them to be involved to keep us alive."

Love loud

When asked about cultural and moral issues such as homosexuality and abortion, Hunt observed that Southern Baptists have been known more for what they are against. "There are so many wonderful things that we are for," he said.

Noting that he can only lead the denomination as he leads his church, Hunt cited examples from First Baptist Woodstock. "In our church we use the term 'love loud,'" he said.

Hunt said his congregation ministers to homosexuals by showing them love and also by sharing what the Scripture says about that lifestyle.

In regard to abortion, it is not enough to just be against it. “What are we doing for those who choose to keep their babies?” he asked. “Are we stepping up to the plate? How loud are we loving people and showing them that we care?”

Hunt also admitted that he does not feel compelled to speak out on every issue. “There are issues that are moral that I don’t feel the pressure to speak to because God has spoken to those issues.”

In his closing remarks, Hunt acknowledged that everyone does not have to agree with him theologically. Hunt said he hopes to show there is room “under the Southern Baptist umbrella” to those with the passion to take the gospel “down the street and around the world.”

“Maybe God’s gotten Southern Baptists’ attention that we’d better join hands and do what (God’s called us) to do in the time we have.”

Jennifer Rash of The Alabama Baptist contributed to this report.