

EDITORIAL: SBC's young bulls climb to hilltop

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The Southern Baptist Convention crossed a generational divide at its 2009 annual meeting. To be sure, the SBC may or may not succeed in consolidating strong commitment from young adults in the long term. But their presence in Louisville this month wrested leadership from the hands of the old cadre who took control of the convention a generation ago. Younger leaders and their allies now have ascended and will call the denominational shots unless they, too, get out of touch as they age.

A case in point: Danny Akin and Al Mohler overwhelmed Morris Chapman.

Chapman represents the old guard of “fundamentalist” or “conservative resurgence” leaders (your modifier depends upon whether you agreed with them or not) who took control of the SBC in the late 1970s through the early '90s. Chapman was a favorite son of the movement: A pastor who progressed to ever-more-prominent pulpits. The successful SBC presidential candidate whose 1990 election sealed convention control. And, soon after, the anointed head of the SBC Executive Committee, theoretically the convention's most powerful staff position.

Editor Marv Kox

The fundamentalist/resurgence coalition held together for most of a generation—long enough to defeat their adversaries; consolidate their victories in most state conventions and launch new state conventions elsewhere; reward their faithful with convention offices, board appointments and denominational jobs; and shape the convention in their image.

What they haven't noticed is they are getting old, the world is getting

younger and since Baptists reflect culture at least as much as, if not more than, the Bible, a rising generation of pastors and laity are finding them irrelevant. (Full disclosure here: This problem isn't unique to the SBC; it's a primary issue facing the Baptist General Convention of Texas.) Also, the triumphalism of their early successes—God rewarded their political victories with strong finances and fast growth—rings hollow now that their finances are tight and the convention has suffered two years of membership decline.

Along the way, two youngish seminary presidents—Akin of Southeastern and Mohler of Southern, both around 50 and downright vigorous in the SBC age spectrum—developed the convention's most vibrant theological schools and, with that, attracted a strong following among both their graduates and other young pastors. This year, they joined forces with Johnny Hunt, the most interesting SBC president in ages, who enjoyed benefits of a denominational insider but apparently saw himself as something of an outsider and consistently demonstrated affinity for befriending and mentoring younger pastors.

So, Akin, Hunt and Mohler proposed creating a "Great Commission Resurgence" task force to turn the SBC toward growth. Apparently fearing denominational upheaval, Chapman opposed it and even lashed out at their recommendation during his report in Louisville, an act of old-bull desperation that young-bull Akin felt secure in blasting as "shameful." When messengers finally got around to voting, their support for Akin, Hunt and Mohler's idea was so overwhelming, the convention parliamentarian ex-claimed, "Wow!"

The Great Commission Task Force faces a complicated task. It will need to deal with denominational duplication. It must address how to respond to America's demographic change, or else everything else ultimately will be irrelevant. It should be honest about differences of theology (Calvinism and Arminianism), practice (missions outreach, worship style) and even

behavior (everything from dress, to lifestyle, to attitudes about gender).

But at the outset, the Louisville vote was about the SBC's generation gap. The power base has shifted.