



Criteria for church membership in Fla. convention recounted

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By Keith Hinson

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--Many Southern Baptists don't really understand the true relationships between their SBC ministries, state conventions, associations and local congregations, said John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention.

"Ours is a perceived polity," Sullivan told attendees at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's Feb. 5-7 "Issues in Baptist Polity" conference.

"Most people, if you ask them about Baptist life, ... will perceive our polity as looking something like this: The local churches make up the local Baptist associations.

"The local Baptist associations make up the state conventions, and the state conventions make up the Southern Baptist Convention.

"That is perception; that is not how it is," Sullivan stated.

Rather, each Baptist organization or entity is autonomous, whether a local church, state convention or association, Sullivan said.

"The Florida Baptist Convention is as autonomous as any local Baptist church," Sullivan noted.

"That simply means the state convention has a right to decide with whom it will affiliate. We, too, are autonomous."

The Florida convention confronted the issue of autonomy in a new way in 1995 when the Alachua Baptist Association dismissed two churches from its membership. A third church withdrew from the association before its dismissal could come to a vote by the association.

In the wake of the expulsions over "neo-Pentecostal teaching and exercise," Sullivan said, the three congregations assumed "they would become churches-at-large with the Florida Baptist Convention."

But when the Alachua association objected, Sullivan said he agreed with them.

"Until this time, the only procedure necessary to be a church-at-large ... was to send money for Baptist causes," Sullivan recounted. "There was no process for accepting or rejecting churches. We had no documents for handling this situation."

With Sullivan's urging, the Florida convention's state board of missions approved a process that led to Sullivan and other convention leaders requesting meetings with representatives of each of the three churches.

While one church refused such a meeting and another voluntarily withdrew from the convention after two meetings, another church "was recommended for dismissal which was communicated to them and graciously received," Sullivan said.

The dismissal at the annual state convention meeting came some time after a meeting in which Sullivan, his associate executive director and the state convention president met with a man and a woman from the congregation in question.

"I asked the lady, 'What do you do in the church? What is your position in the church?'" Sullivan said. "She said, 'I am the prophet. ... When I walked through the door, I knew your spiritual gifts by the discernment of God.'"

Sullivan recalled Ted Traylor, then-president of the state convention and pastor of Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, asking her, "Suppose your discernment runs contrary to Scripture?"

The woman's reply was: "I supercede Scripture," Sullivan said.

The man from the same congregation claimed to be the apostle for the church and said he knew this was so because the woman had told him so.

"They still had Baptist in their name and were surprised when I confronted them and said to them, 'This is unacceptable,'" Sullivan said.

The controversy led to the adoption of Bylaw 2 by the state convention, a way of relating to churches-at-large perhaps unique to Florida among all state conventions, Sullivan said.

Among the features of Bylaw 2 are:

-- financial participation of at least \$250 annually through the Cooperative Program.

"If a church doesn't give \$250 through the Cooperative Program, what is their world missions program?" Sullivan asked. "It's a 10-watt radio station that goes to the county line. That's not a world missions program."

In 1996, 581 Florida Baptist churches did not give anything through the Cooperative Program. That figure had declined to 45 by 2002, Sullivan said.

-- statistical participation and reporting through the Annual Church Profile (ACP).

"We believe that the ACP is a strategic document [so much so] that we go after them," Sullivan explained. "We want those documents, and we want to know what they say, and we want to know that that church is cooperating."

To those who say he is interested in numbers, Sullivan said his reply is, "Of course I am. Who isn't? I want to know how much they gave through the Cooperative Program, ... how many people they baptized, ... what they've done in missions."

-- establishment of a denominational polity and practice committee as a "standing committee of [the]

state board of missions, [serving] as a credentialing committee for churches-at-large."

-- theological considerations.

According to Bylaw 2, churches-at-large "shall have specified ... a declaration that the basis for its theology, faith, practice and polity is the Bible, with the Baptist Faith and Message revised in the year 2000, or any other declaration of faith, which parallels the tenets of our historic Baptist faith, as the theological framework."

Sullivan indicated the bylaw did not limit doctrinal agreement to the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message, or even the 1963 version.

"It was designed because we had some churches still using the New Hampshire Confession of Faith and some churches that had written their own confession of faith that may even be better than the Baptist Faith and Message," he said.

For churches that do not comply with the statistical or financial expectations, "we give them three years [and] then they get a personal visit," Sullivan said.

"We sit down eyeball to eyeball and say, 'Do you want to be a part, or do you not want to be a part?' That's where we are right now," he said, acknowledging, "We have been lenient on the statistical side."

Some churches failing to submit ACPs are contacted by telephone with "the use of what we call the 'short form,'" Sullivan said. "That's when we get our folks on the line and we ask them ... eight questions" in an effort to complete a minimal ACP.

Sullivan said Bylaw 2 is not a "cure-all ... but it surely has helped us in Florida to get a handle on a sticky issue called state convention polity."