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Crowded SBC presidential field grows by 2: Avery Willis, Johnny Hunt

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. (ABP) -- A crowded field of hopefuls for the Southern Baptist Convention presidency appears to be developing, with two high-profile candidates set to join three already-announced nominees. Retired SBC International Mission Board executive Avery Willis and Atlanta-area pastor Johnny Hunt will reportedly be nominated for the denomination's top position. SBC messengers will elect a new president and conduct other business during the body's annual meeting, scheduled for June 10-11 in Indianapolis.

Willis will reportedly be nominated by John Marshall, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Springfield, Mo. An Associated Baptist Press reporter, acting on tips from several sources, spoke to Marshall's assistant the evening of May 5. She said she could not confirm that he would nominate Willis, but would convey the request for confirmation to him.

Marshall had not returned the message as of midday May 6. But *The Pathway*, the in-house news organ of the conservative-dominated Missouri Baptist Convention, posted a notice on its website late the evening of May 5 that Marshall had "announced May 6" his intention to nominate Willis. It also said further details would be published May 7.

Hunt also did not respond to ABP's request for confirmation of tips that he would be nominated. But Ted Traylor, pastor of Olive Baptist Church in Pensacola, Fla., confirmed via e-mail May 6 that he would nominate Hunt. "For 12 years, many in the SBC have wanted to have Johnny lead and serve our convention as president," Traylor said. "His passion is to reach the nations. I know of no other pastor who has had a positive influence on more young pastors than Dr. Hunt. Our future as a convention requires that we connect with those young church leaders."

Willis retired in 2004 as IMB's senior vice president for overseas operations. A former missionary to Indonesia, he is well known across the SBC as an expert on missiology and discipleship. He created the MasterLife discipleship series used by the SBC's publishing agency, now known as LifeWay Christian Resources. He now lives in Bella Vista, Ark., but continues to work with several initiatives that bring evangelical missions organizations together for joint evangelism strategies.

Hunt, pastor of First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Ga., was initially expected to be a candidate during the last contested SBC presidential election, in 2006. But he dropped out a month before the convention. Although he was the first choice of the SBC's conservative leadership in 2006, Hunt was likely to face opposition from one or more other factions in the convention -- most notably a loose-knit group of younger conservatives protesting what they called the leadership's narrow and exclusivistic track record.

Instead, Hunt nominated Ronnie Floyd, pastor of First Baptist Church of Springdale, Ark., that year. But Floyd and another candidate with the support of some SBC power-brokers -- Nashville, Tenn., pastor Jerry Sutton -- both lost to an outsider candidate, South Carolina pastor Frank Page, who is completing his second one-year term next month. Presidents customarily are re-elected to a second term but cannot serve more than two consecutively.

Both Hunt and Floyd came under heavy criticism for their churches' weak records of giving to the Cooperative Program, the denomination's unified budget. Page, in contrast, had consistently led his church to give a relatively high percentage of its undesignated receipts to denomination.

The presidency has been the key to gaining and retaining control of the 16 million-member denomination and its agencies. The SBC's inerrantist leaders have controlled the position for almost three decades, usually running unopposed. Since 1979, all SBC presidents have been inerrantists. But only two were elected without the approval of the small cadre of insiders who directed the denomination's rightward shift, which took place during the same period.

The 2008 SBC presidential election was thrown into disarray in February, after Southern Baptist Theological Seminary President Al Mohler dropped out of the race for health reasons. He was widely expected to be the establishment candidate for the position.

Three other candidates for the spot have already been announced. Frank Cox, pastor of the Atlanta-area North Metro First Baptist Church, has already been announced. His large congregation also has a strong record of CP giving. Two long-shot candidates from California have also announced their candidacies: former Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary professor Bill Wagner, and Orange County pastor and activist Wiley Drake.

Drake, who pastors the tiny First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park, Calif., has for more than a decade been an SBC annual-meeting gadfly known for his folksy humor and frequent motions on behalf of ultraconservative causes,

Upcoming ‘Manifesto’ rebukesevangelicals for becoming pawns

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Several prominent conservative Christian leaders, in a joint statement to be unveiled May 7, are rebuking their fellow American evangelicals for allowing secular politics to co-opt their faith. “An Evangelical Manifesto,” set to be released at a Washington press conference, reportedly criticizes evangelicals for allowing the religious label to become synonymous with conservative politics.

The Associated Press, which attained a draft of the statement in advance of the announcement, reported May 2 that the manifesto is “starkly self-critical” of the evangelical movement for focusing on secular politics to the detriment of the gospel proclamation that is at the core of evangelicalism. “That way faith loses its independence, Christians become ‘useful idiots’ for one political party or another, and the Christian faith becomes an ideology,” the statement, according to the AP, says.

Press materials said the manifesto “seeks to clarify the confusions and corruptions surrounding the term ‘evangelical’ that have grown so deep that the character of what it means has been obscured and its importance lost.” The statement was spearheaded by popular evangelical author Os Guinness. Among its more than 80 initial signatories are Richard Muow, president of Fuller Theological Seminary; and David Neff, editor of *Christianity Today*.

It criticizes evangelicals at both ends of the political spectrum for getting so heavily involved in fighting over culture-war issues -- such as abortion rights and gay rights -- that they have earned evangelicals the reputation of being little more than a political special-interest group. The document is clearly aimed at the most politically active evangelical conservatives, however.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the most prominent Religious Right activists have not signed on to the document. According to news reports, its signers don’t include figures like Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, Tony Perkins of the Family Research Council or Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

The document is the latest evidence of an increasingly apparent division within American evangelicalism between emerging leaders and many in the old guard of the movement. Younger leaders -- and some of their older allies -- have lamented the increasingly strong identification of the evangelical tradition with the Republican Party’s conservative wing. Many of them also have encouraged evangelical leaders to move away from a focus on fighting legalized abortion and gay rights without a similarly intense focus on issues like protecting the environment, fighting global AIDS and poverty and supporting international religious freedom and other human rights.

Half of SBC churches could die before 2030, president predicts

CARY, N.C. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention is rapidly dying, and resistance to change could kill over half of the denomination’s churches by 2030, the outgoing SBC president said May 1. Unless something is done to reverse the downward trend, Southern Baptist churches could number only 20,000 -- down from the current total of more than 44,000 -- in fewer than 22 years, South Carolina pastor Frank Page said. His comments came in a conference call with pastors, hosted by the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

Page said the problem “resided in the churches” that refuse to change to stop their inevitable demise. He said the SBC downturn is not the denomination’s fault -- because of poor programming or lack of emphasis on the denominational level. “The reality is it’s our fault,” Page told the Pastor’s Disciple-Making Network, an initiative of the North Carolina convention. “People rarely rise above the level of their pastor’s spiritual life, and it is critical that pastors maintain a vibrant walk with Christ.”

Page confessed to the “busyness” which often accompanies life in modern ministry, with committees and administrative responsibilities overwhelming a pastor’s schedule to the point that he has no time for serious study of the Bible, prayer or meditation. “Pastors can easily get distracted, and they must fight against it, because pastors must remain learners of Jesus for as long as they live,” said Page, pastor of First Baptist Church of Taylors, S.C. “Many Southern Baptist churches are small groups of white people who are holding on [until] the end,” he said. “Not only have we not reached out to younger generations, but we have failed to reach out to other ethnic minorities who are all around us.” Rather than embracing a “whatever it takes” mentality to change and restore a local church to health, Page said, many pastors and churches have “chosen to die rather than change, and they are doing it.”

Page said the vision of pastors must be biblical, firm and resolute, or else when they face “the horizon of trouble, their vision is the first thing out the window.” Pastors must stay the course or risk being blown off course by the trials that accompany any change in any church, Page emphasized. “Church members must be helped to catch the vision, and pastors must work to bring their people to a place of trust” so they will follow the pastor’s vision, he said.

Personal interaction with the pastor and times of pastoral care and concern are essential to establishing relationships capable of embracing change, Page continued. “Until I pastored a congregation of more than 1,000 people, I always personally called every member on their birthday,” Page said. As a result, in times of personal crisis or church-wide change, they knew “that their pastor was involved in their lives and cared about them,” he said.

Page’s recent book, *The Incredible Shrinking Church*, discusses the declining status of churches in America. The book attempts to help churches make the transition from a mentality of an inevitable decline, without resorting to non-biblical organizational tactics. Although change is a church imperative, Page said, there is “no national entity currently helping them do that.”

Making that transition was the topic of discussion by the pastors after Page left the conference call. “I see no more courageous call for any pastor than to lead their people to leave behind unbiblical methods of ministry and embrace new

ways of accomplishing biblical goals,” said Rick Hughes, the state convention’s senior consultant for discipleship. “We must face the fact that much of the American church is declining for a very biblical reason: We have failed to be and make disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

The Pastor’s Disciple-Making Network was established to provide fellowship, instruction and opportunities for interaction with evangelical scholars and church leaders.

Pastor’s Disciple-Making Network

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A May 4 vote to oust 71 dissident members of Nashville, Tenn., megachurch Two Rivers Baptist Church failed by four votes -- less than half a percent. The 71 members are plaintiffs in a lawsuit filed against church leaders last year alleging improper spending practices and seeking access to financial records. The ouster attempt was proposed by embattled pastor Jerry Sutton and the deacon chair, Carlos Cobos.

Exactly 1,000 church members voted, according to a letter Cobos sent to the congregation after the vote. Of those voting, 663 voted to dismiss the plaintiffs, while 337 voted “no.” A two-thirds approval was required, Cobos said in the letter, but the motion fell four votes short -- with 66.3 percent.

Last October, Sutton, who has served Two Rivers for more than two decades, easily won a churchwide vote of confidence in his leadership -- 1,101-286. The plaintiffs had asked a local judge to stop the vote-of-confidence meeting, but she refused.

One month earlier, those church members filed the lawsuit charging Sutton with refusing to release church records to members and with using church funds on his daughter’s wedding reception and other questionable expenses. Sutton has repeatedly denied the allegations.

The April 23 motion to dismiss the suit-filing members read: “Because of the continued violation of biblical standards clearly outlined in our constitution and bylaws, and because of the damage done to the witness, reputation, and welfare of Two Rivers Baptist Church, we, the pastor and deacon officers, in compliance with our church’s bylaws, move that the plaintiffs be dismissed from church membership.”

The motion was presented to members in an April 23 letter, which noted that the plaintiffs could choose to repent before the May 4 vote, have a private meeting with two deacons, remove themselves from the lawsuit, and pledge not to be part of an appeal or any future lawsuits. The plaintiffs stood their ground, however, and remained in the lawsuit.

In the May 4 letter, Cobos acknowledged that “though *Robert’s Rules of Order* states that those being disciplined are not entitled to vote, the deacon chairman made a decision before the beginning of the counting process to include the votes of the 71 plaintiffs.”

The plaintiffs’ attorney, Mark Freeman, was allowed to observe the vote count, Cobos told Two Rivers members in the letter. Freeman praised the deacons for their action. “We spent several hours together and counted and recounted the ballots,” he told the Tennessean newspaper May 5. “All the counting was done in good faith.”

Church member Peggy Lewis was one of the 71 who went to church May 4 expecting to be voted out. After hearing the results of the vote, she told the Tennessean, “I’m just praising Jesus. God is still on the throne.”

Two Rivers Baptist is one of the most prominent congregations in the Southern Baptist Convention, which is headquartered in Nashville. Many of the denomination’s top leaders attend the church. Sutton, a one-time SBC first vice president, lost a three-way race for the SBC presidency in 2006.

Christ identifies with poor, Vestal tells Baylor students

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- God identifies with the poor and the powerless, and Christians encounter Christ when they serve the weakest of the world’s citizens, Daniel Vestal recently told a group of social-work students at Baylor University.

“Concern for the poor and the powerless is not partisan politics. It is central and integral to the gospel of Jesus Christ,” stressed Vestal, executive coordinator of the Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, at an April 24 dinner. Baptists haven’t always realized that truth, Vestal said, acknowledging he did not comprehend the connection between Christ and the poor when he was a young person growing up in a Texas Baptist church. “The gospel used to be more about pie-in-the-sky than the here-and-now,” he recalled.

Vestal said his own “social conscience” was awakened almost exactly 40 years ago, when Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. Vestal was a graduate student at Baylor in the spring of 1968. “I realized I bore responsibility for social and economic justice,” he remembered. But many Baptists still have been “wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years,” while the gap widens between rich and poor Americans and between rich and poor nations, he said.

Social workers trained at Baylor are “wonderful examples of practitioners of the gospel,” as they serve the poor and powerless, Vestal said. Unfortunately, they do not represent a dominant position among Christians, he added, lamenting, “The wind of the Spirit [regarding compassion for the poor] is getting more of a hearing in the world than in the church.” Still, Vestal noted, throughout the Gospels Jesus continually expressed love and concern for the poor. He even went so far as to tell his followers the criterion for their own divine judgment will be how well they cared for the poor and powerless.

Since Pentecost -- not long after Jesus’ ascension to heaven, when the Holy Spirit descended on the young church -- “Christ is no longer limited to time and place,” and the church’s task is to minister on behalf of Christ to the poor, for whom he cared so deeply, Vestal said. Christian social work is distinctive, because it is centered upon Christ, who is “hidden among the poor,” he said, adding Christ also is “served among the poor” when the needs of the weak and powerless are tended. “If you want to see the face of Christ, go to the poor, the powerless, the suffering,” he advised. “As you take Christ to them, you will find he already is there.”

Opinion:How real is the Resurrection?

By Beth Newman(ABP) -- A young woman who had been visiting in the United Methodist congregation my husband serves came to him to inquire about membership. He was, of course, happy to answer her questions, but wondered about the “problems” she said that she had with her previous congregation. Well, she replied, some of the things taught there struck her as a little creepy and almost cultish. Pressed for a specific example she replied that she was told that our bodies would someday be raised from their graves. By the way, she recited the Apostles Creed by heart along with the rest of the congregation each Sunday.

I recalled this incident upon reading an interview in a recent *Newsweek* with the Anglican bishop and New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright. The occasion for the interview was the publication of Wright’s most recent book, *Surprised By Hope*. But the essence of the bishop’s remarks was this: Today, talking about the Resurrection of Jesus means talking about something that few persons have actually heard of. Sort of.

Wright means that insisting on the historicity of the Resurrection is the new part. People are used to hearing of the event spoken of as myth, metaphor, or symbol. People, presumably Christian people, are used to hearing about the “spiritual” meaning of the “Easter event.” It’s just that these same people aren’t really able to say what it has to do with anything.

The fact that these assumptions were featured in a publication as clearly mainstream and middlebrow as *Newsweek* made me wonder how far gone we really are. That the promise of the resurrection of our own bodies seemed to our church’s guest more like a scene from a zombie movie than the consummation of God’s redemptive activity is disturbing in more ways than one.

My alarm is not that there are large parts of the church that don’t think as I do. While that disturbs me, it doesn’t alarm me. The problem, rather, is that the keystone of the Christian story is now missing from the lives and the minds of so many believers. Whether this is from laziness on the part of our preachers and teachers (which I doubt) or from an admirable desire to communicate with its surrounding culture (which is probably the case), we seem to have lost the thread of the only story we have to tell.

My observations have been raised by others as have the typical responses: that the real business of the church is to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, defend the oppressed. That is certainly true. But as our friend Christopher Hitchens has pointed out, it is the height of arrogance to imagine that one must be religious in order to be just, compassionate, or caring. To speak of the Resurrection is certainly not the only way to underwrite a particular way of life. But it is our way.

If I wished to be cynical, I might point out that after 2,000 years of being about the “real business” of the church, the amount of misery in the world seems to have remained constant. As I write these words, thousands have died in Myanmar and thousands more will die. The Christian reason to keep trying in the face of all this misery is not that our striving will end this, but that each individual body is precious to God. The resurrection is the proof of that.

Further, the church’s apparent late-to-the-party attitude toward an issue like climate change derives from not doctrinal navel-gazing or self-absorption, but from our failure fully to imagine all the implications of a bodily resurrection. As Bishop Wright observes, the resurrection of Jesus “gives you a sense of what God wants to do for the whole world....” The resurrection is ultimately about God’s desire for all of creation; through Christ, God is remaking humanity and the cosmos.

As the bearers of the gospel, let’s be sure we understand that.
