



Interest & dialogue sparked by 'church polity' conference theme

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By Gary D. Myers

NEW ORLEANS (BP)--Don't tell the pastors, professors and students who attended the "Issues in Baptist Polity" conference that church governance is a boring topic.

The conference drew more than 165 participants from across the country to New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to hear presentations ranging from local church issues to national convention issues, including congregationalism, regenerate church membership and the use of elders in Baptist churches.

"This [conference] has been worth the time and worth the price," Larry Thompson, pastor of First Baptist Church in Westlake, La., said. Such gatherings, he said, can help Baptists ensure the survival of their distinctives on the local church level -- distinctives he sees as biblical.

"I am extremely grateful for this and I'm looking forward to what the Baptist Center does next," Thompson said, referring to New Orleans Seminary's Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry, which hosted the Feb. 5-7 sessions.

James Leo Garrett Jr., distinguished professor emeritus of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas, drew encouragement from the event, noting that he had learned something from each of the other 10 presenters.

"New Orleans Seminary is to be commended for establishing the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry," Garrett said. "It is important that we have significant academic studies of Baptist affairs, Baptist history, Baptist theology and ethics. This should be the first of many programs of its kind."

One of the highlights of the three-day event was a panel discussion featuring Garrett and Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Seminary; Mark Dever, pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.; and Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

After hearing several diverse opinions on polity issues, one participant asked the panelists to identify the core, Baptist distinctives that should be found in every Baptist congregation.

Garrett cited baptism of believers, congregational polity and religious freedom and Patterson added biblical authority to the list. Land, meanwhile, said personal salvation and a New Testament view of the church are essential to the Baptist identity.

Patterson also noted the importance of regenerate church members as one of the most essential Baptist distinctives. Patterson, as well as other conference speakers, noted that only baptized

believers as church members is vitally important in congregational polity. Since decisions about the church are in the hands of the congregation, those members must be believers to follow and honor God their decision-making.

Stan Norman, associate professor of theology and director of the Baptist Center at NOBTS, created BCTM as a vehicle to bring the theology taught in Baptist seminaries and colleges to the local church. The center seeks to recover and communicate the Baptist distinctives that are on the decline in various churches today.

Norman said he was pleased with participation at the conference. When he planned the program, he hoped to appeal to pastors and church members as well as seminary and Baptist college professors.

"The first conference of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry exceeded all expectations," Norman said. "The theme, 'Issues in Baptist Polity,' resonated with many SBC pastors and laypeople. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, we were blessed to identify and target a real issue in many of churches."

The Baptist Center partnered with Broadman & Holman Publishers of LifeWay Christian Resources, NOBTS' Leavell Center for Evangelism and Church Health and Clifton Baptist Church in Clifton, La., to make the "Issues in Baptist Polity" conference possible. Norman said the center will continue to host annual conferences to address issues and needs relevant for Baptist life.

The tentative theme for next year's conference is "The Mission of the Church." The conference will explore the Great Commission as well as additional polity issues, church discipline, the importance of a regenerate church membership and the ordinances of the church and worship.

Norman said that future plans for the Baptist Center include working with LifeWay to develop an online dictionary of theological terms geared for the laity. BCTM publishes a cyber-journal, the Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry, and Norman hopes the center will be able to produce additional resources and materials to assist and equip Baptist churches in their ministries.

"I pray that our SBC churches will benefit from the resources produced at this conference," Norman said. "The diversity of presentations and perspectives certainly will stimulate further study and dialogue about the importance of polity for the ministry of the local church. The ongoing mission of the Baptist Center is to integrate theology into the ministry of our churches."