

Baptist convention lashes out at gays — lightly

by Jim Baxter . Q-Notes staff

GREENSBORO — The fireworks expected this year at the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) annual meeting, held in Greensboro June 13-14, never happened. The call for Baptists to drop out of “gay friendly” public schools was defeated. Guest speaker Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice urged “respect” in the gay marriage debate. And a mild-mannered pastor from South Carolina was the unexpected choice for the convention’s new president.

This is not at all what anybody has come to expect from the SBC.

In 1997, the Southern Baptists adopted a resolution calling for a boycott of The Walt Disney Co. after it decided to offer benefits to partners of gay employees. Citing changes in Disney executives and more family-friendly entertainment, the SBC ended the boycott eight years later although the company had not changed its gay policy.

This was just one manifestation of the kind of organization SBC became after moderate churches dropped out of the organization entirely in the early 1990s, following years of fighting with

conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s.

This year was different.

The SBC condemns homosexuality, denies gays the right to become pastors and gives churches the right to refuse membership to gays. It also has been supportive of constitutional bans on same-sex marriage.

On the opening day, President George W. Bush — in a five-minute videotaped message to delegates — repeated his usual mantra: opposition to abortion, gay marriage and “activist judges.”

But when a pastor named William Gay from North Carolina proposed that the convention discontinue using the word “gay” to describe homosexuals, his motion met with laughter, according to Greensboro’s *Yes Weekly* (June 21, 2006). It was ultimately ruled “out of order.”

On the 14th, Rice gave an address to the SBC, stressing America’s responsibility to secure freedom, particularly religious freedom.

She was interrupted six times by standing ovations, according to a report in the *The Charlotte Observer* (June 15, 2006). As Rice left the Greensboro Coliseum stage, a spontaneous chorus of “God Bless America” spread like a

wave among nearly 12,000 Southern Baptists in attendance.

Later, in an interview with the *Greensboro News & Record*, Rice urged people to be respectful and sensitive in the debate over gay marriage. However, she avoided a question about her own views on the issue.

“This is an issue that can be debated and can be discussed in our country with respect for every human being,” Rice said.

“When we get into difficult debates about social policy, we get into difficult debates that touch people’s lives, the only thing that I ask is that Americans do it with a kind of sensitivity that real individuals and real human beings are involved here.”

Asked for her opinion of the amendment, Rice closed the subject with a polite, but firm, statement. “This is not my area of expertise or, frankly, my area of concentration at this point.”

Also on the 14th, the convention refused to support a resolution that would have urged the denomination to form an “exit strategy” for pulling Southern Baptist children from public schools in favor of home schools or private Christian schools.

The proposal, offered by Roger Moran of Troy, Mo., and Texas author Bruce Shortt, came as many of the nation’s 16.2 million Southern Baptists are concerned about how classrooms are handling subjects such as homosexuality and “intelligent design.”

Instead of putting the exit strategy before delegates, the denomination’s resolutions com-

mittee called on members to “engage the culture of our public school systems” by exerting “godly influence,” including standing for election to local school boards.

Rev. Frank Page, the SBC’s newly elected president from Taylors, S.C., said he’d stand up for the denomination’s conservative beliefs but added that he plans to do it with a smile. “I believe in the Word of God,” he told *The Associated Press*. “I’m just not mad about it.”

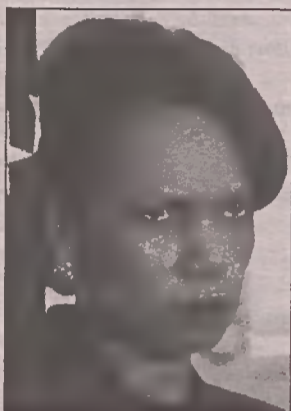
Asked how he would determine who would have a voice in Southern Baptist leadership under his presidency, Page cited “a sweet spirit” as the first requirement.

“For too long, Baptists have been known for what we’re against,” he said. “It’s time to say, ‘Please, let us tell what we’re for: That there is a life transforming, relevant-to-today’s-people message that we have to share.’”

In the ultimate irony, anti-gay protesters were at the Greensboro Coliseum to picket the unveiling of a statue of the Rev. Billy Graham.

“I told him we were going to picket his funeral when he dies and he’s not a well man,” the Rev. Fred Phelps, of Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kan., has said. Like Graham, Phelps attended Bob Jones University and was ordained by the Southern Baptist Convention.

Phelps, who is no longer affiliated with the convention, said Graham has become too soft on homosexuals. Phelps was actually protesting at a military funeral in Bismarck, N.D., but members of his church were in Greensboro to demonstrate. ■



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— Condoleezza Rice replying to a question about gay marriage at the Southern Baptist Convention



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