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ROANOKE, Va. (ABP)-Messengers to the Baptist General Association of Virginia's 181st annual meeting elected the group's first African-American officer, agreed to apply for membership in the Baptist World Alliance and engaged in unexpected debate over the sale of a handful of properties.

The meeting in Roanoke drew about 1,500 messengers. While they approved proposals to apply for full membership in BWA-an umbrella group for national and regional Baptist denominations worldwide-and to increase funding for the organization, a proposal to sell a group of properties drew significant attention.

A proposal to sell the convention-owned Baptist Student Union building at Virginia Commonwealth University to the school inspired the most disagreement. The chair of a convention task force charged with studying the feasibility of maintaining all of Virginia Baptists' BSU properties said the building's liabilities outweigh its assets.

The motion to sell the BSU building ultimately passed, although it was amended to reflect that it was authorizing Virginia Baptist Mission Board officials to sell it rather than demanding they do so.

In addition, messengers approved a \$14.4 million budget for 2005, a slight increase over the 2004 budget of \$14.3 million. Virginia Baptists have three different giving plans—one that supports traditional Southern Baptist Convention causes, a second that includes support for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and other entities outside the SBC, and a third that allows individual churches to customize their giving plans.

In the second budget option, messengers approved a proposal that increased the percentage funding of the BWA in 2005 and reduced the percentage going to the SBC's International Mission Board. The Southern Baptist Convention voted to withdraw from BWA earlier this year, leaving the BGAV as the group's single largest funding entity, according to BGAV Executive Director John Upton.

The change would not alter the giving to SBC causes through the convention's traditional plan.

In addition, messengers approved—with little dissent—a motion to apply for full membership in BWA. BGAV has provided the organization with funding without requesting membership.

Messengers also elected three new convention officers and re-elected a fourth. All ran unopposed.

Richard Smith of Vienna, Va., was elevated to president from the convention's first vice president position. Smith is an attorney and a member at Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, near Washington, D.C. He succeeds Don Davidson, pastor of Mount Hermon Baptist Church in Danville.

Bert Browning, pastor of Huguenot Road Baptist Church in Richmond, was elected the convention's first vice president.

For the second vice president position, messengers elected Mark Croston as the BGAV's first African-American officer. Croston is pastor of East End Baptist Church in Suffolk. Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond President Tom Graves said Croston's election was “an historic and long-overdue moment for Virginia Baptists,” adding it was time “to proclaim that the Civil War is over.”

The convention's 2005 annual meeting will take place Nov. 10-11 in Woodbridge, near Washington.

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