

LOUISIANA BAPTIST MESSAGE

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BAPTIST MESSAGE

Since our report to the Convention in November, the *Baptist Message* has been busy on multiple fronts:

- Our team has implemented a new publication schedule, trimming our print editions from 24 to 14 per year. This has caused us to be more mindful about the time-sensitive nature of some events to make sure we give enough advance notice to our readers so that they can plan to attend. Likewise, we are learning how to better integrate our coverage of events in our online reporting as well as our social media communications – giving advance notice of the events as well as publishing what resulted.
- On that note, we are working with our web developers to assess the utility of offering a phone edition to subscribers as an option for receiving our news reports, feature articles and information updates. Those who have a print subscription will have free access to the online content that originates in our newsroom. Those who purchase a web subscription would have the same access. Anyone without a paid subscription would have to pay a per article fee or simply subscribe.
- Until we complete the web architecture, the online paywall will remain off and the content will be accessible to anyone.
- In that regard, we are working to develop an RSS feed that would allow churches to post our headlines on their websites to add a dynamic component to their online content – and we already have a prototype. Members would simply visit their church website and click on the *Baptist Message* headlines to access our content. Again, individuals who have a paid subscription (print and online) will be able to view all the content that is accessible through the RSS feed.

In addition to the structural changes that we are working on, we have moved forward in developing a new feature for the web and print editions. The *Baptist Message* has obtained a repository of more than 6,000 Christian cartoon panels and already we have added this new content to the website. Now, we are looking at regularly using these in our print editions, possibly within a redesigned special features page.

As for reporting, we have been following numerous developments within the Southern Baptist Convention, including the lawsuit loss by the North American Mission Board at the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals and the subsequent denial of its appeal by the U.S. Supreme Court. The case, *North American Mission Board v. McRaney*, now returns to the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi.

In effect, the Supreme Court decision means Will McRaney, the former executive director of the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware, has prevailed in his effort to finally depose witnesses, including NAMB President Kevin Ezell as well as past and present trustee and employees. His legal team will now have an opportunity to present evidence to the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi in his claim about NAMB's "intentional interference with business relationships, defamation, and intentional infliction of emotional distress" related to his termination by the Baptist Convention of Maryland/Delaware.

Likewise, we have covered other critical issues related to the SBC such as the growing tensions about Critical Race Theory; the sudden resignation of Russell Moore as president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission; and a growing plagiarism scandal involving newly elected SBC President Ed Litton, pastor of Redemption Church in Saraland, Alabama.

We also have followed closely the growth of the Conservative Baptist Network, more than 10,000 pastors and other individuals have joined, especially because of its origins in Louisiana, and now the formation of a state chapter here.

But our bread and butter continue to be the stories of Louisiana Baptists' missions and ministries.

Last year, we completed a 10-part series updating Louisiana Baptists' progress on completing the 10 goals of The President's 2020 Commission Final Report.

One quick note: Due to pandemic restrictions and multiple natural disasters, Louisiana Baptists did not meet the goal of completing the 300th church plant in 2020 (since 2013). But our church planting strategists tell me that we possibly will celebrate that milestone sometime in 2021!

This year, we have been following up on the continued push by our congregations to fulfill their ministries while coming out of the pandemic restrictions as well as emerging from the devastation of three hurricanes and two major storms. We have been ecstatic to report, that through all the challenges, the Gospel has continued to move forward in the state and beyond our borders because of the continued cooperation among Louisiana Baptists.

OFFICE OF PUBLIC POLICY

The hectic pace for the Office of Public Policy has continued from 2020 into 2021. Last year, the Office of Public Policy was actively engaged at the national level with such issues as the C.A.R.E.S. Act and making sure that churches and evangelists were included in the Payroll Protection Program if they chose to participate. We also worked with federal policymakers to change the subsequent rules from the Small Business Administration to remove language that would have conflicted with our Louisiana Baptist beliefs about marriage and human sexuality.

This year, we have made our position known to national lawmakers regarding the so-called "Equality Act," which would remove the protections of our First Amendment rights that are outlined in the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Essentially, the "Equality Act" would

prevent the **expression** of our beliefs, thereby elevating the rights of lesbians, gays, and transgender individuals above those of Christians. The bill, H.R. 5, passed the U.S. House and is awaiting action in the Senate, but could be on hold for a while because of the threat of a filibuster by conservative members.

As important as that legislation is in its potential impact on religious liberty, there were equally critical bills in Baton Rouge, and the Office of Public Policy was there to represent the voice of Louisiana Baptists during the legislative process. We worked with state legislators and staff to influence the wording of legislation; testified before committees, providing key research to shed light on issues; and sometimes simply went the record to state Louisiana Baptists' consensus beliefs about the matter as an appeal to legislators to do the right thing.

Fortunately, there are faithful men and women who are elected officials or key staff members, and they are working hard, too; and a number of these Christians are Louisiana Baptists.

The work by the Office of Public Policy included:

-- Sen. Beth Mizell, a member of First Baptist Church, Franklinton, championed S.B. 156 *Fairness in Women's Sports Act* that was drafted to protect the rights of girls and women by preventing biological males (who self-identify as women) from participating on teams designated for females. She successfully navigated the measure through both chambers, but the legislation was vetoed by Gov. John Bel Edwards. The Office of Public Policy worked with Sen. Mizell and other conservatives to rally pastors to successfully persuade lawmakers to vote for a historic veto override session. The Senate voted 26-12-1 to overturn the governor's veto. But 10 House members who voted for the measure during the regular session did not vote for it this second time, and the governor's veto was sustained, 68-30-6, two votes short of the needed override tally.

-- The Office of Public Policy provided testimony against H.B. 67, which would have legalized prostitution and elevated it to the same status as any line of work in the state. Despite testimony from proponents that mocked "morals" and urged members of the House Administration of Criminal Justice Committee "not to look to your pastor" for guidance about prostitution, the bill failed to get out of committee.

-- Rep. Danny McCormick, a member of Trees Baptist Church in Vivian, sponsored a religious liberty resolution to express the legislature's intentions regarding executive order violations that involve the exercise of constitutionally protected religious freedoms. The Office of Public Policy presented the bill to committees in the House and the Senate, emphasizing its potential to de-escalate conflicts when critical ministries (feeding, disaster relief, Celebrate Recovery, etc.) must be performed during statewide emergencies. Both chambers adopted the measure, 67-20-18 and 23-13-2, respectively.

-- Sen. Mizell and Sen. Heather Cloud worked with the Office of Public Policy to extend the life of two legislative task forces that were formed largely because of resolutions adopted by Louisiana Baptists. Mizell championed S.C.R. 68 which ensures that she will continue to lead the state effort to develop legislation to incentivize counseling for couples considering marriage and

reconciliation sessions for parents in distressed marriage relationships. Meanwhile, Cloud pushed through S.C.R. 195, which renews the state effort to protect children from exposure to pornography. The work of these two groups was interrupted by the pandemic restrictions of 2020.

Moving forward in 2021, the Office of Public Policy will be working with local Louisiana Baptists and other faith groups in Tangipahoa Parish, to defeat the upcoming ballot referendum which would allow a defunct riverboat casino in Shreveport to relocate to Slidell. Also, two state groups, the Kentucky Baptist Convention and Kansans for Life, have reached out to Louisiana Baptists for help in passing statewide ballot measures like the Love Life Amendment that passed in Louisiana in 2020. The Office of Public Policy will continue to provide consulting support as they push to protect the pro-life laws in their respective states.