Baptist convention leader welcomes diversity

By JOHN RAULY
Media General News Service

PEMBROKE — The Rev. Larry Locklear grew up in a county where he and all other American Indians were segregated from whites by law and often separated from blacks by choice.

But in the relatively short span of his 49 years, the color lines have nearly disappeared. When Cummings became the first minority to head the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, a predominantly white organization of 1.2 million members.

Some Baptist Indians say that Cummings, who is a Lumbee Indian and the former first vice president of the convention, became president after the Rev. Mark Brunson’s term expired in November, never learned Indian, while his classmates even voted for him to do anything outside of school. But that may have been partially his fault, he said.

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Brownington agreed, saying that American Indians in Robeson County, segregated themselves from blacks.

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The Rev. Mike Cummings, director of missions for the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association, was elected first vice president at the Baptist State Convention of N.C. earlier this week.

Minister sees new position as a calling

Ed Wilcox
Religion editor

PEMBROKE — The Rev. Mike Cummings’ ministry expanded this week.

Cummings, the director of missions for the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association in Pembroke, was elected first vice president of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

Cummings’ position with the local association involves him in the work of 61 churches and two missions, including American Indian tribes such as the Coharie in Sampson County, Waccamaw Siouan in Columbus County, Haliwa Saponi of Warren and Halifax counties and the Tuscarora and Lumbee in Robeson County.

His election during the convention in Winston-Salem means he will have an even greater involvement in the lives of Baptists throughout the state.

Please see CUMMINGS, Page 10A
Cummings

He describes himself as a conservative, "but not the kind who is nit-picky and has to do everything my way. I'm not hard to get along with, I try to be open to what other people say."

It is an attitude that Cummings believes will help him to be an asset to North Carolina Baptists, who have experienced difficulties over diverse opinions in recent years.

His experience in the local association is something he hopes to draw from as he serves in his new office.

"We're in nine counties, we have one church in Baltimore and one in South Carolina," he says of the association. "There is a uniqueness and diversity here and that may be a plus, because I am willing to struggle to bring a sense of community among the Baptists."

Seeking the office was not one of Cummings' goals.

"Running for first vice president was not in my wildest imagination," he says.

Several months ago, he says, a colleague phoned him, saying he thought Cummings should seek the vice presidency. Charlotte native Phil Davis, the first black to hold the office, had announced he would be taking a position with the North American Mission Board and would not seek re-election.

"I was overwhelmed that I was asked," Cummings says. "I talked with my wife, Quae, about it and we prayed about it.

"We felt, win or lose, it would be an affirmation for the Burnt Swamp
Rev. Michael Cummings, Director of Missions, Burnt Swamp Baptist Association

Rev. Michael Cummings was raised in the St. Annah community by his parents the late Foy Cummings and the late Hildith "Bloss" Cummings. He received Christ as a youth, was then baptized, licensed and ordained to gospel ministry through the Bear Swamp Baptist Church of Pembroke, NC and is currently a member there. Rev. Cummings graduated from Campbell College in 1974 with a degree in English. In addition, he is a 1977 graduate from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. Rev. Cummings' ministry career has been spent in the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association. His church vocational experience includes the following: Pastor, New Bethel Baptist Church in Clinton, NC from 1969-1978; Pastor, Mt. Airy Baptist Church in Pembroke, NC from 1978-1988. In 1983 he was employed in his current position as the Director of Missions for the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association. Other services to the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association includes Moderator, Nominating Committee, Constitution Committee, Seminary Extension Director, Missions Committee, and Program Committee. Rev. Cummings serves as the Vice President of the NC Baptist State Convention. He is the first and only Lumbee elected to this position. It is his dream as Vice President to see North Carolina Baptists working in harmony with God's purpose for all, maintaining commitment to every institution and agency through with Baptists touch people's lives for Christ. His leadership to the Baptist State Convention will bring cultural awareness and representation that will help the Convention remain sensitive to the rich diversity of the Baptist family and the community of North Carolina. Other services to the Baptist State Convention includes the following: General Board member, Council on Christian Social Services, Baptist State Convention Committee on Committees, Campbell University Board of Ministers, and Nominating Committee Chairman for NC Directors of Missions Conference. His other memberships include the Lumbee Correctional Institution Community Resource Council, Robeson County Church and Community Center Board, the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics Board, Chaplain for Pemberton Hospice, Carolina Bible College Board, and the Southern Baptist Native American Fellowship.

Rev. Cummings is married to Quae S. Cummings who serves as the Burnt Swamp Association Secretary. They have two children, Jason who attends Columbia University Law School, and Jody who attends NC State University. Jessica, their daughter is in elementary school.

Rev. Michael Cummings
Cummings’ election is good news

Being elected to a leadership position in a statewide organization is quite an accomplishment, but when the post is with an organization as prestigious as the North Carolina State Baptist Association, it is indeed quite an honor.

The Rev. Mike Cummings, missions director of the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association at Pembroke, was so honored when he was elected first vice president of the convention on Tuesday.

The Burnt Swamp Association is a nonprofit organization that serves 60 predominantly American Indian churches in nine counties.

Whatever joy Mr. Cummings might have felt after his election was certainly shared by those who know him. The Robesonian received numerous phone calls Wednesday telling us the good news of his election in Winston-Salem.

The reaction of Elizabeth Jacobs, who works with the Burnt Swamp Association, summed up the feelings of most of the callers. “Praise the Lord,” she said. “This is great news. [The] Rev. Cummings will serve the convention well.”

Further good news for the area is that the Rev. David Crocker of Fayetteville was elected the association’s second vice president.

The Rev. Mac Brunson, pastor of the Green Street Baptist Church in High Point, was elected president.

Mr. Brunson gave an indication of the direction he will take in leading the state’s Baptists when he said the denomination must spend less time contemplating its own divisions and more time communicating with young people.

It would be good to have the moderates and conservatives end their squabbling over how to get the message out and let the convention go about the task of just spreading the word.

We wish the new leadership well, especially Mr. Cummings, in the endeavors to lead the state’s Baptists.
BAPTIST LEADERS

Cummings, Crocker typify hopeful new togetherness

The thunder and lightning caused by rubbing the terms "moderate" and "conservative" against each other have crackled over Baptists in North Carolina for several years.

But the terms seem to lose their edge, perhaps even their meaning, when you consider the two preachers from the Cape Fear region elected to top jobs by the Baptist State Convention last week.

The Rev. Mike Cummings, director of missions for the 61 churches of the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association, a mostly Lumbee Indian flock, is first vice president of the convention. He is rated a "conservative."

The Rev. David Crocker of Fayetteville's Snyder Memorial Baptist Church is rated a "moderate," and he was elected second vice president.

Cummings and Crocker may be from opposite sides of the ratings terminology. But they certainly seem to be more interested in affirming their denomination's togetherness than in fighting over who is what.

Cummings says church politics isn't his bag. He told Observer-Times staffer Earl Vaughan that he will bring to his leadership at the state level his continuing goal in his full-time job. "This business of creating a sense of community is at the heart of what I do," he said.

Crocker is even more intimately involved in community-building within the denomination. He was a member of a "committee of 20" that brought moderates and conservatives together to agree to stop speaking only in epithets to each other. He, too, emphasizes reconciliation over rhetoric.

Baptists have often seemed to have a hard time practicing tolerance among their own kind. But the election of Cummings and Crocker is a hopeful sign that the state's largest denomination is ready to pursue a little peace in its household.
Lumbee to be first minority to lead

By John Bailey
JOURNAL REPORTER

When the president of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina resigns this month to lead one of the country's largest Southern Baptist churches, a minority will for the first time take the convention's helm.

The Rev. Mike Cummings of Pembroke, a Lumbee Indian and the convention's first vice president, will finish the term of the Rev. Mac Brunson of Green Street Baptist Church in High Point, who accepted a call Sunday night to become the senior pastor at First Baptist Church of Dallas in Texas.

"I don't think it (the convention) will ever miss a beat. Mike's extremely capable," Brunson said yesterday. Brunson said he will resign the presidency at the convention's general board meeting in Asheboro on May 18, bylaws, the convention's first vice president fills the president's unexpired term in such a situation. Cummings is the director of missions for the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association in Pembroke, a group of Baptist churches of various American Indian tribes mainly in southeastern North Carolina. He will assume leadership of predominantly white convention.

R.G. Puckett, an editor emeritus of the convention newspaper, the Biblical Recorder, said that Cummings' ascension is a historic one. "It's sort of Baptists facing the real world. We've had minorities in the vice president's offices but never in the presidency."

Cummings said, "I'm sensing that North Carolina Baptists are really growing toward being committed to recognizing the cultural widening."

Cummings, 49, is a graduate of Campbell College, now called Campbell University, and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest. He is a conservative.

So is Brunson, who is 41 and in his second, one-year term as the convention president. That term would have expired at the convention's annual meeting in Winston-Salem in November.

Cummings, who will be eligible to run for re-election in 1998, will finish the president's term until then. It will be Cummings' first executive role in a white convention. "It will be a challenge," he said. "I think diversity is important."
minority to lead N.C. Baptists

Mike's extremely capable yesterday. Brunson was the president at the general board meeting in 1982. By convention bylaw, the first vice president's unexpired term in the presidency at the convention's annual meeting in Winston-Salem in November.

Cummings, who will be eligible to run for the presidency in the fall, said he has yet to decide whether he will. He has no special plans for the convention, he said, other than to carry on the work of Brunson and others in building bridges between moderates and conservatives.

Brunson said that his last day at Green Street Baptist will be May 23. He said he plans to begin work in early July at First Baptist, which has about 12,000 members.

Brunson has earned a reputation here as a bridge builder between moderates and conservatives, and has worked with others on a plan in which the two groups would share power in the convention.

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REV. MAC BRUNSON: He will resign as the convention's leader May 18.
"He's had a real heart for it, to the point he has probably been viewed skeptically by some conservatives, who maybe worried that he had gotten soft," said the Rev. David Hughes of First Baptist Church on Fifth Street in Winston-Salem. Hughes is a moderate.

In Texas, moderates and conservative have split into two conventions.

"It's a lot more volatile out here. It is pretty hot," Brunson said.

"But like I told the church, I'm not coming out here to save this convention, I'm coming out here to pastor this church."

The Rev. Mark Corts of Cavalry Baptist Church in Winston-Salem said he gave Brunson a good recommendation when members of the Dallas church asked. "There's no question in my mind that Mac is a Southern Baptist Convention man. And that church, of course, is known as a conservative church."

"But it's also a church that wants to put ministry and mission ahead of just politics. They want a leader."

Before the First Baptist congregation called him Sunday, Brunson preached two trial sermons. In each sermon, he dealt with unity. "There's just not going to be that division and bickering in the church," he said he told the congregation.

First Baptist is a downtown church facing competition from growing suburban churches. Its senior pastor emeritus, the Rev. W.A. Criswell, continues to cast a long shadow at the church. Brunson will become the church's third leader this decade.

BRUNSON, A GRADUATE of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has been at Green Street Baptist since 1992. The church's membership has grown to about 3,600 during that time.

"Our hearts just break to leave Green Street," Brunson said. "But I don't feel like I had a choice. I feel like it's just where God wants me to be."

Tom Inman, the chairman of deacons at Green Street Baptist, said that his church will form a search committee to look for Brunson's replacement. "Of course, everyone is sad that he is leaving, because he is such a tremendous pastor. But at the same time, we can understand God's call, really, on him and his ministry, and understand the ability he'll have to to reach a much greater audience through the ministries of First Dallas."
The Rev. Mike Cummings, the first minority to head the Baptist State Convention, says he wants to unite the state's largest denomination.

By Margaret Moffett Banks
Staff Writer

ASHEBORO — With members of his Native American Baptist association by his side, the Rev. Mike Cummings took his place in history Wednesday when he became the Baptist State Convention's first president from a minority race.

Cummings, a Lumbee Indian, replaced the Rev. Mac Brunson, a High Point minister who is leaving the convention to become senior pastor at First Baptist Church of Dallas.

The ceremony took place at Caraway Conference Center, where the convention's 110-member General Board was meeting.

Cummings, who had been the convention's first vice president, will serve as acting president until the denomination's annual convention in November.

He's pastor of the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association in Lumberton, an association of 65 Native American Baptist churches.

With 1.2 million members and 3,800 churches, the Baptist State Convention is the state's largest denomination.

Cummings, a conservative, said in a speech Wednesday that he is committed to a plan to give moderates and conservatives shared control of the convention.

He wasted no time extending an olive branch to moderates. He told board members that he wants to reach out to them.

"Let us celebrate the fact that we're not hiding behind walls anymore. For too many years, we've run from you. But in Christ, we've come to understand that we are absolutely, eternally related."
that the Burnt Swamp Association is quite conservative. Many members of the five tribal groups who make up the association frown on female preachers and deacons.

But he added: "I hope that is not offensive to you, for whoever you are is not offensive to us," he said.

The Baptist State Convention, he said, is taking on the complexion of the state, with its growing Hispanic and Korean populations. Cummings also made note of his American Indian heritage and the irony of his rise to the presidency.

"Let us celebrate the fact that we're not hiding behind trees from you anymore," said Cummings, flanked by his wife and 10 members of the Burnt Swamp Association.
Swamp Baptist Association. "For 500 years, we've run from you. But in Christ, we've come to understand that we are absolutely, eternally related."

Before he passed the gavel to Cummings, Brunson called Cummings a "native son" of the state, and said he was proud to turn over the presidency to someone of Cummings' stature and integrity.

Brunson said that the sun is rising on North Carolina Baptists because of a plan that would let moderate and conservative factions take turns holding key elected positions within the convention.

Convention delegates will vote on the plan in November.

Brunson also joked about his high-profile move to Dallas, which drew much media attention here and in Texas. He read a top 10 list that dispelled myths about his job.

For the record, he said he won't live in a mansion, get tickets to Cowboys games or own a private jet. And he said he's not making "anything close" to the $300,000 salary he was rumored to be offered.

But there is a secret panel in the pastor's study, he said.

Brunson will preach his last sermon at High Point's Green Street Baptist on Sunday. He'll begin his new post in Dallas sometime in July.
BY YONAT SHIMRON
STAFF WRITER

PEMBROKE — It's hard for the Rev. Michael Cummings to eat a quiet lunch these days. When he walks into an Lumbee-owned restaurant to eat a meal of fried chicken, collards and corn bread, he's treated like a celebrity and inundated with well-wishers.

"Congratulations!" cries one woman, rushing forward to shake his hand.

"We're so proud of you," bellows another.

You'd think Cummings just won an Oscar. But this Lumbee Indian has just become the president of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, replacing Mac Brunson, who left to lead another church in Texas.

For Indians who know their history and remember their second-class status with the state convention between 1929 and 1965, it's a sweet moment. Christianity, and specifically the Baptist church, has been a central part of many Indian lives for as long as they can remember. Now, they feel, their devotion is finally being recognized.

Cummings, who has served as first vice president since 1997, is a particularly beloved native son. An easy-going, thoughtful man with a gracious smile, he evokes intense pride among Indians and doesn't want to disappoint.

SEE TAR HEEL PAGE 58.
Indians and he doesn't want to disappoint.

"For hundreds of years we were viewed as a people that needed somebody to help them," said Cummings, 49, director of the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association, the largest organization in the life of the state's Baptist Indians. "Missionaries were sent to us and we sensed paternalism in that. But we've grown in our view of taking responsibility. If anybody is going to take responsibility for Indians, it's Indians."

As president of the 1.2 million-member state convention, North Carolina's largest religious group, he faces some difficult challenges. In November, representatives from local churches will vote on an unprecedented shared-leadership plan in which conservatives and moderates take turns running the convention. Cummings' future may fall or rise on the plan, which he supports and said he will crisscross the state to endorse.

Having personally suffered the slings and arrows of discrimination, Cummings says, his life has prepared him to champion inclusion. Having grown up in a sharecropper's shack and then a mobile home, he never took for granted that he would go to college.

The association he leads today runs a food pantry, operates a summer camp, maintains a prison ministry and offers continuing education classes for ministers. It is the single most important institution governing the lives of the state's Baptist Indians. It is also one the oldest, established in 1877, 10 years before the first state-funded Indian school was created.

Behind the modern, neo-Colonial association building stands a clapboard structure, the old Burnt Swamp Baptist Church. It is now a museum and it houses pictures, letters and books documenting the early life of the community.

Cummings' new role as president of the Baptist State Convention will likely be recorded there as a watershed event.

"We just needed the door to be opened," said the Rev. Larry Lochlear, pastor of Island Grove Baptist Church in Pembroke. "Other opportunities will come."

Yonat Shimron can be reached at 829-4891 or yshimron@nando.com.
pared him to champion incursion.
He remembers when Robeson County, home to some 40,000 Lumbees, had separate water fountains for blacks, whites and Indians. Until 1964, he was denied admittance to white schools, not to mention restaurants, department stores and barber shops. And he knows what it's like to be the only Indian face in a classroom of students.

But Cummings, who has spent 19 years as a pastor, is not the type to protest at civil rights rallies or march on Congress: He is politically moderate and theologically conservative.

Born the eighth of 12 children on a 20-acre farm three miles from his office, Cummings grew up learning home-grown values of hard work and sacrifice.

From the time he was born, he shared a bed with two brothers. From the time he was a teen, his parents relied on him to help milk the cows, feed the mules, chop the wood and harvest the tobacco.

"My daddy taught me about family and responsibility for the household," Cummings said. "That's what he passed down to me." Church occupied a central role in Cummings' life and in the life of the community. Time not spent laboring in the fields was spent at church. The message heard there was intensely emotional and traditionally Christian.

Today, most American Indian churches would be considered conservative. In the association of churches Cummings heads, there are no women pastors and no women deacons. Only one pastor is getting divorced, and pastors who have remarried would not be welcome.

"We're very biblically literate, but we're not a highly educated church," Cummings said. "We don't teach from the perspective of the seminaries, which has been, for the most part, moderate. We're very traditional in how we do church."

Unlike the majority of Indian pastors who are not seminary trained, Cummings completed a Master of Divinity degree at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest. And he has enjoyed the luxury of being a pastor full time. About 80 percent of Indian pastors hold down a day job while preaching on the weekends.

From the time he was voted "best all-around person" in his senior yearbook, Cummings was groomed for leadership.

Members of his first church, New Bethel Baptist in Clinton, were of
Many believe new president can unify Baptist State Convention, bring in minority members.

The Rev. Mike Cummings is the first minority to head the Baptist State Convention.

JOURNAL PHOTO BY DAVID SANDLER

That is 1.1 percent of that city's budget.

Raleigh's proposed budget gives $500,000 to
The Rev. Mike Cummings grew up in a place where he and the other American Indians were segregated from whites by law and often separated from each other by choice.

But in the relatively short span of his 49 years, the color lines have fallen — or at least subsided — in his home of Robeson County and elsewhere. That was made clear this month when Cummings became the first minority to head the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, a mostly white organization of 12 million members.

Some Baptist American Indians say that Cummings' rise means that they are finally getting the recognition and power they have long deserved. This is a new day for us," said the Rev. Tony Hewington of Robeson County, a Baptist American Indian.

Cummings, a Lumbee Indian and the former vice president of the convention, became president this month after the Rev. Mac Brunson of High Point resigned to take a job in Texas. Cummings promises to continue one of Brunson's pet projects: a plan that would have the convention's moderates and conservatives share power in a last-ditch effort to end infighting that has split conventions in other states.

Supporters say that Cummings, a theological conservative and political liberal, may be just the man to carry out the plan.

And as a member of a minority whose job is working with various Indian tribes in southeastern North Carolina, they say, Cummings brings a certain expertise to the table. "He can take diversity and bring it together," said the Rev. Larry Locklear, a minister who serves in Robeson County.

Cummings' story is one of a quiet drive, during which he and some of the other 11,000 American Indians in the convention have worked hard to build...
BAPTIST LEADER

Continued From Page B1

a power base and find common ground with white Baptists, whose concerns have often been different from their own. But as much as Robeson County and the rest of the world have changed in his lifetime, Cummings is not yet satisfied: He wants to ease the way for more minorities to join the convention.

In that field, the convention faces strong competition. Most of the state’s black Baptists, for example, belong to the General Baptist State Convention of North Carolina. Cummings, however, thinks his own ethnicity will help. “I think the focus on me as a minority makes a powerful statement to other people of minority backgrounds,” said Cummings, a tall, gray-haired man easy with smiles and words.

Cummings grew up one of 12 children just outside Pembroke, in a small frame house surrounded by the fields of tobacco, corn and cotton that his father farmed. His parents were Baptist.

Cummings decided on the ministry at 19. After attending what was then Campbell College and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, he served New Bethel Baptist Church in Clinton, then Mount Airy Baptist Church in Pembroke. He and his wife, Quac — a Caharie Indian, began raising their family of two boys and a girl.

In 1988, Cummings became the director of missions for the Burnt Swamp Association, which he still holds. The association is a group of 65 American Indian churches, including members from the Lumbee, Coeurie, Waccamaw Siouan, Haliwa-Saponi and Tuscarora tribes. Indians founded the association as a refuge in days of oppression and segregation, Cummings said.

Now, he said, one of the association’s major mission focuses is evangelizing American Indians beyond North Carolina. Association members have conducted mission trips to American Indian reservations in Oklahoma, South Dakota, North Dakota and New Mexico.

The convention’s Indians did not achieve full membership and voting rights until the 1960s, Brewington said. “At that time there were people from this area who were in leadership roles in the convention who opposed our membership. The racial tension, the racial prejudice was very strong then,” he said.

Even though they were full members, Cummings and his American Indian friends describe an uneasy process of finding their place in the convention.

“I don’t think it’s ever been a verbal thing. It’s just been an invisible line. We probably have felt like we couldn’t fit in because of the numbers,” said the Rev. Bruce Swett of Robeson County.

And their churches are very different from white Baptist ones, American Indian ministers say. Their worship style includes clapping, raising hands in the air and shouting, they say.

In Robeson County, as elsewhere, American Indian, white and black churches remain largely segregated.

And the issues their rural churches deal with are different as well, the American Indian ministers say. For example, many of their churches are poorer than white churches, and their ministers lead congregations that deal with sustenance issues such as putting food on the table and the need for good jobs. “While there are many Indian people here with professional degrees and white-collar employment, we have far more who struggle at or below poverty income levels,” Cummings said.

But the American Indian ministers say they find common ground with white Baptists on emphasizing the basics of evangelism, missions and Christian education. And in a convention where moderates and conservatives have often battled, the American Indian members have gained strength as conservatives have achieved power in the convention.

Although many of the convention’s American Indian members are political liberals in their fight for an equal power share in the secular world, they are theologically conservative. They say that conservatism is rooted in the oppression American Indians endured. “Our only hope was the Bible as the inerrant word,” Locklear said. Cummings became president at a meeting in Asheboro on May 19. Members of the Burnt Swamp Association stood by his side.

“This takes them to another level of involvement and a level of acceptance. I applaud that,” said the Rev. Mark Corts of Cavalry Baptist Church in Winston-Salem. He is a white conservative.

The American Indians want more of their ethnic group to serve on convention committees, and on its general board. Only a handful do so now. “There’s a need for us to have more people on committees, but there’s also a need for our churches and our folks to recognize that they have these opportunities,” Locklear said. Cummings said that American Indians make up about 1 percent of the convention’s members.

His presidential term will expire in November, when the convention holds its annual meeting in Winston-Salem. Because he was the first vice president, convention bylaws determined that he would automatically assume the president’s spot when it was vacated.

Cummings’ supporters say he would have a good chance in an election for the presidency, and hope he’ll run.

Cummings said he will decide this summer whether he will run for election to another one-year term.

Cummings hopes to be especially effective at bringing more American Indians to the convention. The Burnt Swamp Association comprises almost all of the convention’s Indian members; few Cherokees in Western North Carolina or American Indians from other areas of the state are members.

There are just more than 80,000 American Indians in the state, Cummings said. Many of those American Indians are unchurched, Cummings said. And more important than drawing them to the convention, he said, is leading them to Christ. He said that some North Carolina Indians have been saying lately what American Indians in the West have long said: that Christianity erodes the Indian culture. But that’s not true, Cummings said. “We just don’t see a conflict with being a Christian and being an Indian.”

Although he grew up with few Lumbee traditions, he said, those traditions are making a comeback, and he’s glad. “I never drummed and I never learned the dance, but my children do.”

Cummings said he wants to evangelize to other minorities, such as Hispanics and blacks, and bring them to the convention as well — just as white missionaries once drew his forebears.

“We were the first mission field, and now we’re part of the team that’s doing the evangelizing. And that seems to be full circle.”
New Baptist official not into the politics

A Robeson preacher, only the second Indian elected to a church post, says compromise is an essential part of his new role.

By Earl Vaughan Jr.
Religion writer

Talking with the Rev. Mike Cummings is like relaxing in a favorite chair or sliding into a pair of comfortable shoes.

In a matter of minutes, the listener is completely at ease. Before long, Cummings seems as familiar as an old friend.

The warm smile, the curly gray hair and the demeanor of a loving country preacher helped the Pembroke native win over the State Baptist Convention this week.

Cummings was elected first vice president of North Carolina’s largest denomination, a position he sought only because conservative friends in the state asked him to run.

Church politics is low on Cummings’ list of priorities. His first concerns are family and the church — he is director of missions for Burnt Swamp Baptist Association in Pembroke.

It goes back to his days as a boy, one of 12 brothers and sisters and the son of sharecropper Foy Cummings and his wife, Hildith.

His parents had a hand in rais-
THE REV. MIKE CUMMINGS

- Address: 5824 N. Chicken Road, Lumberton
- Age: 48
- Hometown: Pembroke
- Family: Married the former Quae Simmons. They have three children. Jody, 22, is a graduate of Duke University in his first year at Columbia Law School. Jason, 19, is a sophomore at N.C. State University majoring in engineering. Jessica, 9, is a fifth-grader at Union Chapel Elementary School in Lumberton.
- Education: Campbell College, 1974, bachelor of arts degree in English; Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1977, master of divinity.

Staff graphic

made up for my lack of wisdom. Just before his marriage, the church called him to serve full time for $100 a week. The deacons bought him a mobile home on church property.

Whatever our needs were, they anticipated them, Cummings said. "When our first child came along, they built the parsonage."

In 1978, Cummings made a difficult decision to leave New Bethel and head close to home and the Mount Airy Baptist Church in Robeson County.

"I was their first full-time pastor," he said. "Some of the people thought it was too much of a challenge. The church was larger and had a good deal more resources."

But Cummings met the challenge and stayed there until 1988. Then came a new opportunity, director of missions for the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association.

The association oversees 61 churches and two missions, most of them in Robeson County.

The churches are all Indian congregations, but as Cummings stressed, they are not all Lumbee like himself.

The tribes in the association include Coharie, Waccamaw-Siouxan, Haliwa-Saponi and Tuscarora.

"To a great extent, it still is in a rural community." Cummings was a teenager when he felt the call of God. In his second year at Campbell College, he began preaching at New Bethel Baptist Church in Sampson County.

"I thought the church took a risk with me," Cummings said. "I was a single boy struggling with the same feelings and temptations a 19-year-old boy struggled with. But they extended a call to me."

He had to commute to and from school and church, but didn't have a car. So the church bought him one. "They had a chicken plate sale and raised $700," he said. Cummings got a 1967 Chevelle. "It wasn't the souped-up kind," he said, laughing. "Mine was the stripped-down model."

During his college years, Cummings would spend weekends and most of his summers living in the homes of New Bethel members.

One family after another would say, "This is your room, preacher," he said. "They were a super group of people."

During that time he met his wife, Quae. They were married in 1972. He was 22, she was 18.

"I would be terrified if my boys would do that," he said. "God just..."
WINSTON-SALEM — A Pembroke minister was elected first vice president of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention on Tuesday.

Mike Cummings defeated moderate Charlotte Cook in the race for first vice president with 52.2 percent of the vote.

Cummings is missions director of the Burnt Swamp Baptist Association in Pembroke.

Cummings, who is still at the

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convention, could not be reached for comment. The convention ends today.

"Praise the Lord," said Elizabeth Jacobs after hearing the news of Cummings election. Jacobs works with the Burnt Swamp Association. "This is great news. Rev. Cummings will serve the convention well."

The Burnt Swamp Association is a non-profit organization that serves 60 predominately American Indian churches in nine counties.

The Rev. Mac Brunson, pastor of Green Street Baptist Church in High Point, was elected as president.

Brunson said the denomination must spend less time contemplating its own divisions and more time communicating with young people.

"We need to be reaching Generation X, who absolutely could care less about this convention or formal church services," said Brunson. "They want to know, 'Is there a God out there, and can he meet the needs in my life?'"

Brunson, 40, defeated the Rev. Jack Causey on Tuesday with 53 percent of 4,920 ballots. He said he believed the younger generation has been put off by the internal bickering between conservative and moderate Baptists.

Second vice president

The Rev. David Crocker, a moderate from Fayetteville, won the post of second vice president with 50.4 percent of the ballots over the Rev. Allan Blume, a conservative.

"I don't know that I blame them," he said. "I want to move our focus on to other things than denominational politics and start a new cutting-edge ministry."

Brunson's victory topped off a strong showing by conservatives, who were elected to the top two positions in the state's largest religious denomination and narrowly lost the third.

Conservatives and moderates have disagreed on how to get their message out. Conservatives believe in a more literal view of the scripture, while moderates say the Bible is subject to more interpretation.

Brunson vowed to continue the work of outgoing president Greg Mathis of Hendersonville, who was the first conservative elected since the national convention turned conservative nearly two decades ago.

Mathis has been praised by many Southern Baptists for working well with moderates during his two years as president.

"I'm going to carry on the cooperation, balance and fairness," Brunson told a packed news conference after the results of the election were announced.

Brunson said he was pleased with the new spirit of togetherness within the ranks of the convention.

"It has worked extremely well," said Brunson, whose church has 3,400 members. "Conservatives have been cut off for so many years. We feel like we have a voice."
Center's future to be discussed

MAXTON — The public is invited to attend a meeting Thursday to discuss the future of the North Carolina Indian Cultural Center. The meeting will be at 7 p.m. at the Evans Crossroads Fire Department.

Among those scheduled to attend are Paul Brooks, chairman of the N.C. Indian Affairs; Dobbs Oxendine, vice chairman of the N.C. Indian Culture Center Board of Directors; David Carter, of the Robeson Historical Association, and Michael Cummings, president of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

Refreshments will be served.