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Sherman may leave Fellowship to return to Asheville pulpit

By Greg Warner

ASHEVILLE, N.C. (ABP) -- After only two years as head of the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Cecil Sherman may soon resign to become interim pastor of First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C., a church he served for 20 years.

Sherman, 66, said Jan. 10 he has been approached by church leaders about the position and agreed to consider the job. But, he emphasized, "It is not a done deal. There will be more conversation with them before anything is decided."

Charles Russell, chairman of deacons at the Asheville church, said the deacons voted unanimously Jan. 10 to offer Sherman the job. The vote does not require congregational approval, Russell said.

Sherman was pastor of the Asheville congregation from 1964 to 1984. His successor, John Hewett, resigned suddenly last October for personal reasons. A second staff member since has been forced to resign, adding to the turmoil.

Sherman said his familiarity with the church made it natural for the deacons to approach him. "I care about those people. ... They are very good people."

Russell said Sherman is highly respected in the church and community, making him an appealing choice for interim pastor. "Our congregation is in need of a healing process," he said.

That healing could take some time, Russell said, and Sherman has been approached about staying for "longer than a normal interim."

Sherman said he is not interested in being the church's permanent pastor, but he might be willing to serve about a year and a half or two years and then retire in Asheville. Russell said "it is conceivable" that the interim post could last that long.

The primary reason for considering the move, Sherman said, is his health and the health of his wife, Dot. Although neither is ill, he said, the constant travel required by the Fellowship job is taxing.

When Sherman became the Fellowship's first chief executive officer in March 1992, he said his age would probably limit his tenure to three or four

years.

"I have worked hard, and I needed to work hard," he said, noting he has derived "a great deal of satisfaction from this job." He added: "I am convinced we are not at all through in the growth of CBF, not at all through."

If he takes the Asheville position, Sherman said, he will stay on as Fellowship coordinator until his replacement is named or at least until after the organization's annual meeting May 5-7.

Russell said the church is open to sharing Sherman with the Fellowship during the transition period, with Sherman only preaching on Sundays in Asheville.

But Sherman indicated that would not be a long-term solution. "I'll do one or the other. I'll not do both. The kind of work there is full time and the kind of work here is full time. And I'm not able to hold down two jobs."

It is not known how soon the Fellowship would move to replace Sherman if he leaves. That topic likely would be at the top of the agenda during the Feb. 17-19 meeting of the group's Coordinating Council in Nashville, Tenn.

The Fellowship was formed in 1991 by groups opposed to the new fundamental-conservative leadership in the Southern Baptist Convention. Although many observers expected the organization to become a new Baptist denomination, it has not done so. However, it has begun its own missions program and a variety of other ministries.

In the 1980s, Sherman was one of the earliest and most fervent organizers of the SBC moderate movement, which tried unsuccessfully to wrest control of the 15 million-member denomination from fundamental-conservatives. When elected by the Fellowship, he was touted as someone who could unite the various moderate elements under the Fellowship umbrella.

Under his leadership, the number of churches contributing to the Fellowship and the total annual income of the Atlanta-based organization has doubled. Contributions during 1993 were expected to exceed \$10 million from approximately 1,200 churches and an undetermined number of individuals.

Sherman, a native Texan, holds a bachelor's degree from Baylor University, a master of divinity degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and doctorates from Princeton University and Southwestern.

After serving 20 years at the Asheville church, he took the helm of Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, in January 1985. He left that position for the Fellowship in March 1992.

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Fellowship funds top  
\$11 million mark in '93

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship took in \$11.2 million in 1993 -- a 53 percent increase over the previous year's receipts.

A record month of contributions in December boosted the Fellowship well over its own income projection of \$10 million for the year, according to preliminary year-end figures from the Atlanta-based group.

The three-year-old organization of Southern Baptist moderates received nearly \$10,950,000 in contributions from churches and individuals during the year. Coupled with income from investments and other sources, total receipts reached \$11,201,000 for the year.

The 53 percent increase for 1993 follows a 62 percent increase in 1992, when receipts totaled \$7.3 million. In 1991 the Fellowship took in \$4.5 million.

December gifts to the Fellowship approached \$2 million for the first time, setting a one-month record of \$1,887,000.

December is traditionally the Fellowship's strongest month because of contributions to the organization's global missions offering. The December total included about \$550,000 for the annual offering, which has a goal of \$3 million. The bulk of the offering comes in after the first of the year.

Cecil Sherman, Fellowship coordinator, welcomed the year-end statistics as evidence of a "banner year" for the organization.

"It's stylish these days to claim growth as evidence of God's blessing," Sherman said. "While I have some reservations about this theology, I believe God has smiled on CBF."

The Fellowship's Atlanta office estimated that contributions came from approximately 1,200 churches in 1993, compared to 841 in 1992 and 391 in 1991.

Churches and individuals who contribute to the Fellowship earmark their money for one of three funding plans that divide support among Fellowship-funded programs and traditional Southern Baptist causes.

Contributors in 1993 continued the trend of directing an ever-larger portion of their gifts toward the Fellowship's own programs. For the first time, more than half of the 1993 receipts went to fund Fellowship efforts -- 58 percent of the \$11.2 million total. That's up from 35.5 percent in 1992.

Additionally, 17 percent of the 1993 funds went to state Baptist conventions and Fellowship-endorsed agencies and organizations. And 25 percent went to the agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention.

While gifts to the Fellowship grew last year, contributions to the Southern Baptist Convention went down slightly for the third year in a row. The Cooperative Program, the SBC's national budget, fell 1.2 percent last year on the heels of drops of 0.36 percent and 1.4 percent in the two previous years.

Although the Fellowship's budget is tiny by comparison, the drop in SBC funding has prompted many Southern Baptist leaders to blame the Fellowship for draining funds from the 15 million-member denomination.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship was established in 1990 by Southern Baptist moderates displeased with the current leadership of the SBC and its agencies.

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-- By Greg Warner and David Wilkinson

SBC president blasts Clinton,  
new condom-use campaign

By Jim Jones

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- The president of the Southern Baptist Convention blasted the Clinton administration's new advertising campaign that urges condom use to prevent AIDS and unwanted pregnancies.

He also criticized Clinton's lifestyle, contending that the president, who is a Southern Baptist, separates his religious faith from the rest of his life.

Ed Young, pastor of the 21,000-member Second Baptist Church of Houston, spoke to more than 9,000 attending the opening night of the Texas Baptist Evangelism Conference in Fort Worth Jan. 10.

"Today," he said, "we are saturated in the media by reports that there will be more advertisements about the necessity of the use of condoms and how

it's going to cut down on pregnancy and cut down on sexually transmitted diseases."

But Young said studies indicate that condom use does not result in truly "safe sex" and that abstinence is the only answer.

The SBC, the nation's largest Protestant group, has launched a highly successful "True Love Waits" program seeking to get 500,000 teenagers to sign pledge cards promising to be sexually pure before marriage.

Other denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church in the United States, are participating in versions of the Baptist abstinence program.

Major church groups have both praised and criticized the Clinton administration's new AIDS-prevention advertising program. A series of public service television ads promotes condom use, and some of the ads encourage abstinence.

Applause greeted Young's declaration that the campaign focusing on condoms instead would lead to more unwanted pregnancies and more people afflicted with AIDS.

Young quoted an unnamed study which he said indicates that if 100 couples use condoms for a year in normal sexual activity 15 couples will become parents. And he said the study found 62 percent would be exposed to the HIV virus.

But Young said the main reason people should refrain from sex outside of marriage is not because of fear of pregnancy or disease but because it is morally wrong. "God has not abandoned the moral absolutes of his holy word, the Bible," he declared.

"America has gotten the idea that salvation is going to come by slogan," he said. "If you want to shoot up, use clean needles. If you want to have sex anywhere, anytime with whomever, use condoms."

"The answer is 'No,' not because you are afraid you might end up in jail or you might end up in an AIDS ward, but because it is wrong."

Earlier in his sermon, Young said a Gallup poll indicated a majority of Americans say they are religious. But he claimed their religion doesn't make a difference in their lives. "A lot of people say 'Here's my church; here's my religion. But it doesn't affect the way I live,'" Young said.

Young said President Clinton provided one of the best examples of separating religious belief from life on the day of his presidential inauguration.

"Early in the morning he went to a gospel meeting," Young said. "When they sang ... we saw tears coming down his face. And I saw this on (television) and said, 'Oh, thank God.'"

"But by the end of the day he had taken his daughter, Chelsea, and dropped her off at a hard-rock concert. And he and his wife had gone to a gay and lesbian ball and finished the evening with a cocktail."

"Let me tell you something ladies and gentlemen ... that's saying 'My faith is over here, but my life is over there.'"

Clinton is a member of the Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark. But many Baptist conservatives disagree with the president's pro-choice stand on abortion, support for gay rights and other issues.

Young, who met with Clinton last year, said he hopes to continue having dialogue with the president.

On Jan. 1 Young launched a campaign at his church asking all congregations in the Southern Baptist Convention to have 40 days of prayer for Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, also a Southern Baptist.

Religious background cited  
as factor in teen marriage

By Bob Allen

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn. (ABP) -- True love may wait but often it doesn't wait long.

Researchers at East Tennessee State University say that children with religious upbringings that stress delaying sex until marriage are far more likely to wed in their teens than are their peers.

"When a value system develops which rigorously restricts premarital sexuality but promotes the sacredness of sex within the marital union, early marriage is a likely outcome," say researchers Judith Hammond, Bettie Cole and Scott Beck in the Review of Religious Research.

Their study analyzed survey data from more than 8,000 respondents from various religious backgrounds -- including Southern Baptists, whose acclaimed teen abstinence campaign, called "True Love Waits," has attracted national attention.

Earlier studies demonstrated that teenagers with conservative religious backgrounds, including Southern Baptists, are less likely to engage in premarital sex than their mainline Protestant counterparts. But, say the authors of the East Tennessee study, their research is the first to link religious heritage with teenage marriage.

While most if not all major religions prohibit sex outside of marriage, there is a stronger emphasis on the sinful nature of fornication in sectarian and fundamentalist groups, the authors say. As a result, parents and children from those groups are more likely to view early marriage as the only acceptable means of culminating romantic relationships.

The promotion of marriage as a sacred institution among the more conservative groups also discourages youth from alternatives to marriage, such as cohabitation or homosexuality, they say.

"It is our contention that the moral communities of fundamentalist and institutionalized sect groups not only inhibit premarital sex among youth, but also promote conformity to the only means to engage in socially approved sex: marriage."

The study contrasted marriage rates for teenagers from fundamentalist and institutional sect backgrounds with those of mainline Protestant, Roman Catholic, non-Christian and no religious heritage. The fundamentalist category was comprised primarily of Baptists, while institutional sects included Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. Non-Christians were primarily Jews and Unitarians.

Using data from the 1979 and 1984 National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth, the study found that percentages of respondents who married by age 19 were significantly higher among the more conservative religious groups. The survey, the authors point out, used a stratified sample which purposely over-represented African-Americans and economically disadvantaged whites.

Of white females in the survey, 43.4 percent of the fundamentalist category married by age 19. For mainline Protestants, the marriage rate for white female teens was 25.3 percent. For Catholics it was 19.8 percent and for non-Christian religions it was 11.3 percent. For institutional sects, the rate was 42.5 percent. For no religion, it was 30.6 percent.

The trend was similar for males. White male teen marriages were highest in the institutional sects (22.5 percent), followed by fundamentalists (17.8 percent), no religion (17.1 percent), mainline Protestant (9.6 percent), Catholic (7 percent) and non-Christian (1.4 percent).

The disparity between teenage marriages among religions did not carry over to black females. They reported the highest marriage rate among the institutional sects (16.7 percent), followed by Catholics (15.1 percent), fundamentalists (12.4 percent), mainline Protestants (12 percent) and non-Christian/no religion combined (10.4 percent).

Earlier studies have pointed out the difficulty of finding indicators for early marriage among black females. One researcher suggests an inadequate pool of "marriageable" black men so constrains the possibility for marriage for black females that other factors do not come into play.

"At least for white teenagers, we assert that the substantial net effects of religious heritage on teen marriage reflect generally stronger pressures to avoid the prohibited practices of premarital sexual intercourse and cohabitation, via the conformist behavior of early marriage among those with fundamentalist and sectarian backgrounds," the authors write.

Other factors affecting marital timing include parental socioeconomic characteristics, family structure, cultural setting and education and economic aspirations, the study says.

Baptist scholar David Gushee told Associated Baptist Press teen marriage may be gaining favor among some conservative Christians. If it becomes a trend, however, it may also bring more divorce, he warned.

Some conservative churches are harkening back to an age when parents encouraged early marriage and were actively involved in selection of their children's mates, said Gushee, assistant professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

"It can be seen as sort of a counter-culture response" to the problem of dealing with adolescent sexuality, he said.

Historically, adolescence -- the gap between puberty and adulthood -- did not exist until recently, Gushee said. Young people got married soon after reaching sexual maturity.

Marrying at age 18 instead of 25 is one way to shorten the number of years young people are prone to "slip into moral danger," he said. While that may work in some specific situations, he cautioned, "in most circumstances in our society today, teenage marriage is not a good idea."

Society's general lack of social and family support to make marriages work is even harder on young marriage partners who lack individual maturity, Gushee said. Also, people marrying early typically lose educational and career opportunities that would allow them to compete with their peers.

"I think probably the culture has changed economically, socially and every other way to such an extent that we will not see a massive return to early marriages that can work," Gushee said.

The ethicist said churches must help not only adolescents face the challenges of sexuality but young adults in their mid-20s.

The need for dealing with that challenge culturewide, Gushee said, was demonstrated by the overwhelmingly positive response to "True Love Waits," the Southern Baptist abstinence campaign.

Still, Gushee said, he was "intrigued" by the East Tennessee study and wouldn't be surprised if a trend toward early marriage develops.

"Though there is a certain appeal to that desire, I am deeply concerned about divorce," he said. "I just can't believe a massive rush in 18-year-old marriages would not further increase the divorce rate."

Religious heritage and teenage marriage  
Percentage of respondents who marry by age 19:

	White Females	White Males	Black Females
Mainline Protestants	25.3%	9.6%	12.0%
Catholics	19.8	7.0	15.1
Fundamentalists	43.4	17.8	12.4
Non-Christian	11.3	1.4	--
No religion	30.6	17.1	10.4*
Total	28.7	11.7	12.8

\* Percentages of non-Christian and no religion were combined for black females because of low numbers of respondents in each category. There were not enough married black men in the respondent group for a sample representation.

Supreme Court rejects challenge  
to park's religious display

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court left standing Jan. 10 a lower court's ruling that a privately-sponsored religious display in a public park is constitutional.

The court declined to disturb a federal appeals-court decision allowing a private group to display scenes from the life of Christ during the Christmas season in San Diego's Balboa Park. The city's policy permitting the display does not offend the First Amendment's requirement of church-state separation, the court said.

Since 1953 San Diego officials have allowed the private group to display eight life-sized statuary scenes. For years city workers erected, removed and stored the display. But since the city attorney warned in 1988 that the city's involvement was unconstitutional, the private group has handled those duties.

The city maintained that the 1,200-acre park featuring theaters, museums, a zoo, picnic areas and sporting fields is a traditional public forum open to all speakers. The appeals court agreed.

It also found that the city's policy meets all three prongs of the legal test for determining whether an action meets the constitutional standard for church-state separation.

To be constitutional under the so-called Lemon test, governmental actions must have a secular purpose, neither advance nor inhibit religion, and avoid excessive entanglement with religion.

The court said San Diego's policy serves the secular purpose of promoting freedom of expression in an open forum and does not entangle church and state.

As for Lemon's middle prong, the court said the city is neither favoring nor disfavoring religion by allowing the display of a religious message in a forum open to all forms of speech on a first-come, first-served basis.

The appeals court said a reasonable person would not conclude that the city's tolerance of the Christmas display amounts to an endorsement of

religion, and that messages expressed in a public forum should be viewed as those of the speaker, not the government.

"Private religious speech in a public forum simply does not violate the First Amendment's establishment clause," said Brent Walker, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington-based religious-liberty agency.

"This is yet another example of the much-maligned Lemon test accommodating religion," he said. "Lemon does not generate an atmosphere of governmental hostility toward religion -- it ensures neutrality."

The long-running, often contentious debate over whether Lemon creates too-high a wall separating church and state apparently will get a close look from the Supreme Court this spring. Justices agreed in December to review New York's creation of a special school district to accommodate the religious needs of Hasidic Jews in a case challenging the application of the Lemon test.

In other actions Jan. 10, the high court:

-- Declined to review a Mississippi child-custody dispute that raised religious issues. Robert J. Muhammad contended that the trial judge's expressed disapproval of some aspects of his Islamic beliefs improperly tainted the custody decision.

Mississippi's top court agreed that the trial judge's interjection of his personal views was inappropriate, but concluded that the custody decision was not affected by religious bias.

-- Refused to review lower-court rulings that five abortion clinics and a physician lacked legal standing to challenge the way Ohio's parental-notification requirement for minors seeking an abortion is being implemented. Minors can bypass the notification requirement by persuading a judge they are mature enough to make their own decision regarding an abortion and that notifying a parent is not in their best interests.

The plaintiffs argued that judges have been given too much discretion to deny requests to bypass parental notification.

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-- By Larry Chesser

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