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Cecil Sherman says he will retire from Fellowship post next June

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Cecil Sherman will retire as chief executive of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship next June, he announced Sept. 28.

Sherman, 67, has held the post of CBF coordinator since 1992. He announced his resignation, effective June 30, 1996, at the opening session of a meeting of the group's Coordinating Council in Atlanta.

"The thing that I was asked to do has happened," Sherman said. He said he and his wife, Dot, "were called to this position to get this infant organization -- which was almost an idea -- up and going. I think that has happened."

Sherman is the first executive of the Fellowship, which was organized in 1991 by moderate Baptists opposing a conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention during the 1980s. It currently receives support from more than 1,400 churches and, with an annual budget of \$13 million, employs 21 staff members and 80 missionaries, and funds a variety of ministries.

"It's impossible to overstate the significant contribution Cecil and Dot Sherman have made to this organization," said Fellowship moderator Pat Anderson of Lakeland, Fla.

Anderson, noting Sherman had informed Fellowship leaders of his plans in advance, introduced an 11-member search committee that will begin immediately to seek a successor. The committee is chaired by Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler, the Fellowship's past moderator and retired executive director of the SBC Woman's Missionary Union.

"It is not an overstatement to say this may be the most important decision-making process we will make the rest of this century," Anderson said. "It's a biggie."

Anderson said he appointed members of the search committee, with input from other Fellowship leaders, to represent diversities based on "gender, generation and geography." The committee has five pastors, four women and two African Americans.

Sherman said he decided to announce his resignation nine months in advance in order to allow a search committee to find a replacement before he leaves. While acknowledging that the early announcement will make him "a lame duck," he said he plans to continue to work aggressively. "I want to earn my pay for nine months," he said. Sherman cited "mixed emotions" about stepping aside. "I have been heavily invested in the organization emotionally," he said.

Sherman said it will be necessary for his successor to continue to work hard to promote the Fellowship in churches and to be committed to the position as a ministry, not just a job. "It takes more energy to do start-up work than maintenance work," he said. "You need a messenger, not a manager."

Before leading the Fellowship, Sherman was a key leader among moderates who resisted conservatives in a series of highly charged political campaigns for the presidency of the SBC. After conservatives captured the post -- with its key appointive powers -- a dozen years in a row, moderates decided to give up the battle and turn instead to establishing alternatives to denominational programs.

The Fellowship organized officially in May 1991. Eleven months later, the Coordinating Council chose Sherman to lead the fledgling organization.

Before joining the Fellowship, Sherman was pastor at Broadway Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, 1985-92, and First Baptist Church of Asheville, N.C., 1964-84.

The Fellowship's moderator-elect, Oklahoma pastor Lavonn Brown, will serve ex-officio on the search committee balanced by gender, clergy/laity and a "mix between experienced war horses and young visionaries," Anderson said.

In addition to Brown and Crumpler, search committee members include:

-- Colleen Walker Burroughs of Louisville, Ky., who, with her husband, David, founded the Passport independent mission camps for youth.

-- Lenthon Clark, a university administrator and an African American who is a member of Rolling Hills Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Ark.

-- James Denison, pastor of Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta.

-- Deniese Dillon, who, with her husband, runs a non-profit adoption agency in Tulsa, Okla.

-- Maurice Johnston of San Antonio, Texas, wife of a retired pastor who has served as co-chair of Texas Baptists Committed and an officer for WMU and the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

-- Stephen Nash, an African American and pastor of Mt. Tabor Baptist Church of Dallas.

-- Walter Shurden, chair of the Christianity department at Mercer University in Macon, Ga.

-- Leon Smith, pastor of First Baptist Church in Gastonia, N.C.

-- Bill Wilson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Waynesboro, Va.

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Religious freedom abuses still noted in Europe, panel says

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Despite enhanced religious freedoms in Europe, incidents of intolerance and discrimination continue, according to participants in a Sept. 27 briefing sponsored by the Helsinki Commission.

Some governments in Europe have laws preferring one religion, and officials turn a "blind eye" to harassment and discrimination on the local level, the commission said.

"Minority faith traditions encounter bureaucratic roadblocks to practicing their faiths and are often the objects of harassment, which is unchecked by civil authorities," said Rep. Christopher Smith, R-N.J., who chairs the commission.

"Improvements in religious freedom in Eastern Europe have come about not so much by legislative change, but by different attitudes on the part of government functionaries," said Paul Marshall, an academic consultant for religious liberty.

In Eastern Europe, Orthodox Christianity "continues to intertwine church and state in a symphony, united in their joint mission," he added.

For example, the Romanian Orthodox Church is seeking to be declared the "national church," Marshall said. Also, a 1991 law declares the Armenian Apostolic Church the "national church of the Armenian people."

Attacks on minority religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Protestants, and Hare Krishnas, have increased this year, Marshall said.

Majority religions have felt threatened by new religions now legally practicing their faiths in Eastern Europe, resulting in discrimination and violence.

Micah Naftalin, national director for the Union of Councils for Soviet Jews, spoke on the problem of anti-Semitism in the former Soviet Union. Jews are targeted for robbery and kidnapping by criminal gangs and are subjected to violence and vandalism in the former Soviet Union.

While Jews can now practice their religion without fear of imprisonment, they still face discrimination and violence.

Russia's Liberal Democratic Party, led by Russian Nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, has introduced a bill that would bar non-Russian Orthodox individuals from positions of power in the government, Naftalin said.

Authorities often refuse to return Jewish religious properties. Authorities also refuse to register their religious and educational institutions, which prevents them from owning property, renting office space or raising funds, he said.

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Moyers' appearance, Dunn's award to highlight Maston Foundation dinner

DALLAS (ABP) -- Religious liberty advocate James Dunn will receive the T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Award at a Nov. 30 ceremony in Dallas.

The banquet will also feature "A Conversation on T.B. Maston with Bill Moyers."

Moyers, an award-winning broadcast journalist and former Maston student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, will interview three other well-known figures whose lives were shaped by the pioneer in Christian ethics.

Joining Moyers for the public dialogue are Jimmy Allen, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and denominational executive; Daniel Vestal Jr., pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church, Houston; and Earl Martin, former foreign missionary, seminary professor and author of a book on Maston's contributions to world missions.

Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington, D.C., is the fifth person to receive the ethics award, presented biennially by the T.B. Maston Foundation.

Dunn has served 14 years with the Baptist Joint Committee, an agency that deals with religious liberty and church-state issues, working on behalf of nine Baptist conventions and conferences in the United States.

The T.B. Maston Foundation exists to provide financial support for the study and application of Christian ethics and to honor the memory of Maston, who taught Christian ethics for more than 50 years at Southwestern Seminary.

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-- By Ken Camp

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