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Fellowship council upholds Peace Fellowship defunding

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's governing board voted Jan. 26 to affirm last summer's decision to defund the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America because of disagreement over the issue of homosexuality.

The Fellowship's Coordinating Council, meeting Jan. 25-27 in Atlanta, overwhelmingly rejected a motion by Jose Orraca of Kent, Conn., to rescind the vote defunding the Baptist Peace Fellowship for its pro-gay stance.

The council instead approved a substitute motion by Joel Snider, chair of the moderate group's ethics and public policy committee, that stopped short of affirming the Baptist Peace Fellowship but opened the door for case-by-case funding of specific projects.

The Baptist Peace Fellowship, which recently moved offices from Memphis, Tenn., to Lake Junaluska, N.C., adopted a "Statement on Gay and Lesbian Justice" last February that declared the organization a "welcoming place" for persons regardless of sexual orientation. American Baptists immediately defunded the group, but eventually restored ties after the Peace Fellowship adopted a revised "Statement on Justice and Sexual Orientation" in June. The revised statement backed off an earlier commitment to "take an active role at denominational meetings" to oppose anti-gay measures and stated the resolution was intended merely to "seek to deepen dialogue" on the issue.

Later, on the eve of the Fellowship's July 20-22 general assembly in Fort Worth, Texas, the Coordinating Council quietly deleted a budget-line item for the Baptist Peace Fellowship. The action was not reported at a plenary session, and many people attending the general assembly did not learn of the action until reading about it in news accounts back home.

Orraca said Fellowship money should not be used to wield control. The Fellowship supports not only its own alternative ministries to programs of the conservative-run Southern Baptist Convention -- including 100 missionaries -- but also gives money to outside agencies that provide services such as theological education, ethics, religious liberty, women in ministry and a free press to Fellowship-friendly churches..

"Our principles are to be inclusive, not exclusive; to cooperate, not to control," Orraca said.

"I'm concerned that if we continue this kind of action, then other organizations will be at stake," Orraca continued. "If we don't like what Women in Ministry do, if we don't like what the Alliance (of Baptists) does, then we will again use money to control."

But Snider, pastor of First Baptist Church in Rome, Ga., said confrontational language in the Baptist Peace Fellowship's original statement left the ethics and public policy committee no choice but to defund the group.

"We just simply didn't feel that, based upon the in-your-face tone of the statement, we would be good stewards of CBF money or relationships to continue funding of Baptist Peace Fellowship," Snider said.

Offering a wholesale affirmation to the peace group "would be to condone the statement itself," Snider said, which many Fellowship members find objectionable.

Since some Fellowship members "have appreciation for other aspects" of the Baptist Peace Fellowship's work, Snider said, his committee did not close the door altogether. Should the Peace Fellowship request money "for specific projects on a consensus issue," he said, "we said maybe we can work something out."

Snider defended the committee's decision last summer and opposed an amendment offered by Orraca to "affirm our cooperation" with the Peace Fellowship.

"We stand where we stand and that includes not condoning the statement," Snider said. "We would be open to working out a future relationship with them if things fall into place."

After a brief discussion, the Coordinating Council rejected Orraca's amendment by an overwhelming voice vote, then adopted Snider's substitute motion by voice vote with no opposition.

In an interview after the vote, Orraca said he was satisfied with the process by which his motion was handled but he believed more members of the Coordinating Council agreed with him but were "afraid" to speak out.

"Southern Baptists have always used money for control, even before the fundamentalists came," said Orraca, who is originally from Puerto Rico. "I find that despicable."

Orraca noted that moderates often criticize fundamentalists for being narrow and exclusive. "Sometimes we are hoity-toity about the other side. We are just as bad," he said.

Snider said local churches, not the Fellowship, should decide issues such as how to respond to homosexuality.

Snider said he believes the Coordinating Council was being "forced" to take a position on homosexuality against its will. "In my mind, we are trying to be positioned in this argument," Snider said. "It's a local church matter. We don't want to position the Fellowship."

Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, said he was "very disappointed" with the Coordinating Council's vote, but pleased the vote did not rule out the possibility of "cooperative ventures" between the two groups in the future.

"I still find it ironic that we are being punished for the very reason CBF was born -- the right to conscience in reading Scripture, a historic Baptist distinctive," Sehested said.

Sehested said the Peace Fellowship did not precipitate nor desire the controversy, noting gay rights "is not among our principle involvements."

"But we refuse, on grounds of conscience as free-and-faithful Baptists, to barter silence in exchange for a budget-line item," he said.

Homosexuality is perhaps the most divisive issue in American Christianity today. Most mainline denominations are experiencing struggles between conservatives who believe homosexual activity is sinful and liberals who argue the Bible's prohibition of homosexuality reflects the culture of biblical authors and is not binding today.

The conservative Southern Baptist Convention dealt swiftly with that question in 1992, kicking out two North Carolina churches that opened their doors to gays and amending its constitution to exclude any church that acts "to affirm, approve or endorse" homosexuality.

Ironically, as the Coordinating Council turned back Orraca's attempt to put them on record as being lenient toward gays, Fellowship leaders anxiously awaited a news story on the subject being written by Baptist Press. Staff of the SBC's Christian Life Commission recently issued a statement criticizing a two-year-old resource on ministering to people with AIDS prepared by the Fellowship, charging it is too accepting of gays. A reporter for Baptist Press had contacted several Fellowship leaders for comment, but the story had not appeared by the time the Coordinating Council met.

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North Carolina pastor's wife nominated to lead Fellowship

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Martha Smith, a pastor's wife in Gastonia, N.C., will be nominated as moderator elect of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the moderate group's Coordinating Council learned Jan. 27.

Smith, a past member of the Coordinating Council, will be nominated at this summer's General Assembly in Richmond, Va., reported current moderator-elect Lavonn Brown, who chairs the Fellowship's nominating committee.

At the general assembly in June, current moderator Pat Anderson will complete his term. He will be succeeded by Brown, pastor of First Baptist Church in Norman, Okla. If elected in Richmond, Smith would be moderator in 1997-98.

She would be the third woman to hold the post. The last is former Woman's Missionary Union executive Carolyn Weatherford Crumpler, who presided over the Fellowship's general assembly last summer.

"Our committee made a concerted effort to find a woman candidate for this year to bring to you," Brown said. "But from the beginning we agreed qualifications should come before gender."

Smith's husband, Leon, is pastor of First Baptist Church in Gastonia and currently serves on a search committee for a successor to CBF Coordinator Cecil Sherman.

She was on the Coordinating Council 1991-1994 and was part of the search committee that recommended Sherman as the organization's first coordinator.

Another officer, Cindy Johnson of Gaithersburg, Md., will also be nominated to a third year as recorder, Brown said.

In other business, the Coordinating Council affirmed last summer's vote defunding a sister organization for its pro-gay stance and elected a high-level staff person at a Jan. 25-27 meeting in Atlanta.

The Coordinating Council rejected a motion to rescind last summer's vote defunding the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America for its pro-gay stance, adopting instead a substitute motion that stopped short of affirming the Baptist Peace Fellowship but opened the door for case-by-case funding of specific projects. (See related story.)

The council also elected 42-year-old Gary Parker, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo., as the first Baptist principles coordinator, one of four leadership positions in a recently implemented staff structure. (See related story.)

In other business, the council heard reports from a commission studying whether the group should form a convention and a group seeking a new chief executive officer and an update on plans to relocate the Fellowship's headquarters.

A commission named to study whether the Fellowship should become a convention separate from the SBC declined to offer specifics about the progress of their discussion. Chairman Randall Lolley said the study commission plans to publish its report for presentation at the Fellowship's general assembly in June.

"Members of the commission agree that we do have a sense of the pulse of our people," Lolley said. "We believe that our findings will contribute to a more informed dialogue regarding the future of CBF."

Lolley said the commission does not plan to bring a specific recommendation about forming or not forming a convention. "That would be wonderful if we could do that," Lolley said, "but it's not our assignment."

The report will "be a disappointment to those who want to have a specific road map for the next five or ten years in terms of structure," Lolley said.

Fellowship moderator Pat Anderson appointed the commission last summer after a motion that the Fellowship take steps toward becoming a convention was ruled out of order at the general assembly.

While most Fellowship leaders say it is too soon to consider establishing a convention, some Fellowship members believe the group should move beyond its identity as a moderate voice within the conservative-run Southern Baptist Convention.

In his report to the Coordinating Council, Fellowship Coordinator Cecil Sherman employed what he called "poetic language" to allude to the Lolley-committee study.

"We have not fully escaped the SBC," Sherman said. "Some of you think we have but we haven't. Things happen there that impact us and we can't keep it from happening."

"We are in a wilderness between where we have come from and where we are going. Some of you are so glad to be out of Egypt you're willing to stay in the wilderness. This is not home. This is the journey from where we come from to where we are going. We're out of Egypt. We're not yet to the land of promise. We're not real sure which direction it is."

A search committee seeking a successor to Sherman, who retires this summer, has received 34 nominations and interviewed several candidates, reported Carolyn Crumpler, search committee chair.

"Contrary to hall talk, we have not offered the job to anybody," she said. "That also means that contrary to hall talk, we have not been turned down by anyone."

"It is our intent to present to you a candidate in April, but we have decided that is not our driving condition," Crumpler said. "We still hope we will, but we aren't going to press ourselves to have a candidate for you in April."

Nine of the 34 nominees for the post are women, said Crumpler, of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Fellowship leaders have signed a lease for offices in Mercer University's planned theology school building and agreed on a piece of land the Fellowship is purchasing. Last fall the Coordinating Council voted to lease offices on Mercer's Atlanta campus for five years and to purchase \$1.25 million worth of property from Mercer.

Mercer and Fellowship officials agreed on purchase of 7 acres adjacent to the campus, reported Bill Owen, chair of the Fellowship's finance committee.

"We feel very, very good about the purchase of the land and the negotiated price," said Owen, of Ardmore, Okla. "Mercer has been very reasonable in the negotiations and we have done well for CBF."

For now, the Fellowship views the land deal as merely an investment in real estate and an opportunity to help Mercer raise revenue to launch its theology school next fall. However, the property could be used to build a permanent Fellowship headquarters, should the organization decide to take that course in the future.

Fellowship receipts exceeded \$11.3 million in 1995, an increase of 26 percent over the previous year, Sherman reported.

The Fellowship received gifts of "right at \$10 million" from 1,450 churches in 1995, Sherman said. In 1994, contributions were recorded from 1,377 churches. A total of 2,751 individuals gave another \$1.3 million to the Fellowship, Sherman said. Last year there were 2,307 individual contributors.

Sherman called the year-end figures "an extraordinarily good report."

Sherman said 202 churches gave about 70 percent of the Fellowship's income. The 1,450 contributing churches fell short of his personal goal of 1,500, he acknowledged, adding that "the easy work is done" in terms of attracting new churches to the Fellowship.

For the first time in the Fellowship's nearly five-year history, however, the finance committee was "overoptimistic" in projected income, Owen said.

Receipts during the first six months of the 1995-96 fiscal year are up 11.5 percent but below the amount budgeted for that period, Owen said. "That is an excellent growth rate but not what we projected" when the current budget was drafted 18 months ago, he said. As a result, the finance committee approached each of the ministry groups and asked them to reduce their current budgets by 10 percent. "That obviously will affect us a little bit and will affect our friends a little bit," Owen said.

The global missions ministry group accepted the retirement of personnel coordinator Harlan Spurgeon, reported Jack Snell, the group's chair. Spurgeon, a long-time employee of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, will retire July 31 after three years with the Fellowship, Snell said.

Snell, pastor of Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., said the Fellowship has in the past received money for missions faster than it expended it. "We recognize today that period of time is quickly running out," Snell said.

The Fellowship currently has 100 missionaries and is hoping for 130 by the end of 1996 and between 145 and 160 next year. "Unless we continue to grow ... we are going to be facing some hard decisions in a couple of years," he predicted.

Two Fellowship missionaries spoke to the Coordinating Council: Jim Smith, who is stationed in Germany, and Rachel Stephens, who recently added six months to her two-year stint teaching English as a second language in the Czech Republic.

Stephens said she felt God was calling her to short-term missions but she would not have been accepted by the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

"Because I'm not willing to say the Bible is inerrant, I could not even go and talk to the Foreign Mission Board," she said. "If it had not been for the fact that the CBF was willing to take a chance on me, I probably would not have been able to fulfill this calling."

A search for another new coordinator position, who will oversee church resources, "is just getting started," said Hardy Clemons, pastor of First Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., who is chairing the search committee.

He said the committee intends to seek a woman for the position, but cannot yet promise the candidate will be female.

Clemons noted that of 58 candidates for another coordinator position filled at the January meeting, only two were women. Clemons said the Fellowship needs a woman in top-level management for "strategic reasons," not "tokenism." The presence of a woman coordinator would make the staff stronger, he said.

The Coordinating Council also discussed two motions about the organization's structure by Jose Orraca of Kent, Conn. One motion called for scrapping a reorganization of the Coordinating Council implemented last year, restoring seats on the group's administrative council for chairs of various task groups.

Instead, the council adopted a substitute motion by Michael Bell of Fort Worth, Texas, to assign a committee to reassess the makeup of the administrative committee. Leaders acknowledged that streamlining the administrative committee, intended to make it more efficient, probably was adopted too hastily to satisfy some members' concerns about centralization of power.

Another motion by Orraca called for Coordinating Council members to be given two months notice before being asked to vote on matters such as restructuring, adding personnel or expending unbudgeted funds. That motion was referred to the council's legal committee, which could report as early as April.

Fellowship names Missouri pastor first Baptist principles coordinator

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Missouri pastor Gary Parker has been named the first-ever Baptist principles coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Parker, 42, pastor of the 2,800-member First Baptist Church in Jefferson City, Mo., was elected unanimously to the post by the Fellowship's coordinating council Jan. 25.

The Fellowship is a moderate Baptist organization based in Atlanta. It supports 100 missionaries and funds a variety of moderate ventures that are promoted as alternatives to programs of the Southern Baptist Convention, which is run by conservatives.

As coordinator of one of four major divisions in a new staff structure implemented last year, Parker will be responsible for emphasizing the Fellowship's stated commitments to open inquiry in theological education, local church autonomy, religious liberty and a free press.

He will be the Fellowship's primary liaison with theological institutions that receive Fellowship funds; and with the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty group in Washington; Baptists Today, a moderate Baptist newspaper in Atlanta; and Associated Baptist Press, an independent news service in Jacksonville, Fla.

He will also promote theological schools related to the Fellowship to college students, work with applicants for scholarships and promote continuing education and job placement for vocational ministers.

John Tyler, chair of the search committee which recommended Parker, said the group received 58 applications and recommendations for the job -- 56 men and two women.

Tyler said the search committee sought a candidate conversant in theological education who has "actively supported the moderate Baptist movement and the CBF in particular."

Parker has served on the Fellowship's Coordinating Council and preached at a general assembly. He has been a leader of the Missouri Baptist Fellowship since its founding in 1991 and faced opposition to lead his own church to allow members an option to support the Fellowship with part of their tithes and offerings, Tyler said.

"He's deeply committed to the importance of Baptist principles and theological education that fosters those principles," Tyler said.

Parker is a native of Spartanburg, S.C. He is a graduate of Anderson College and Furman University with a master's degree from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and a doctorate from Baylor University.

He has been a pastor of Baptist churches in Texas, North Carolina, South Carolina and Missouri. He has written four non-fiction books, including "Principles Worth Protecting" published by Smyth and Helwys, and three Christian-oriented novels published by Thomas Nelson and Victor Books.

Parker's wife, Melody, is a Baylor graduate who is currently seeking a master's degree in counseling. They have two daughters: Andrea, 10, and Ashley, 7.

"Being Baptist means being a convictional person," Parker told coordinating council members. Principles like soul freedom, religious liberty and a free press are "foundational stones" of the Baptist faith, he said.

In accepting the council's vote, he pledged to "be a bell-ringer of Baptist principles, not only in crisis times, but all the time."

· First federal appeals court upholds validity of RFRA

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In the most significant ruling to date on the constitutionality of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a federal appeals court has reversed a lower-court ruling that invalidated the 1993 law.

A three-judge panel of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of appeals ruled unanimously Jan. 23 that Congress acted within its authority when it enacted RFRA. The appeals court rejected a district court's finding that RFRA unconstitutionally intrudes on the power and role of the judicial branch.

Propelled through Congress by unprecedented support from U.S. religious bodies, RFRA restored a long-standing legal test that required government to show a "compelling" reason to restrict religious practice. Religious groups asked Congress to reinstate the test after a 1990 U.S. Supreme Court ruling made it easier for government to pass laws that burden religion.

Under RFRA, if religious practice is substantially burdened, government must show it used the least-restrictive approach available to advance a compelling purpose.

This case, decided by the 5th Circuit panel, Boerne, Texas, centered on a dispute over a Roman Catholic parish's plans to raze part of a 72-year old church building the city wanted preserved. Church officials said the city's landmark preservation law violated the parish's rights under RFRA.

District Judge Lucius Bunton of San Antonio sided with the city, ruling RFRA unconstitutional because it infringed on the authority of the courts "to say what the law is."

The appeals court overturned Bunton's decision, saying RFRA does not conflict with the Supreme Court's 1990 interpretation of the First Amendment, but simply offers protection "over and above" that ruling -- an argument advanced by the Justice Department, which intervened in the case to defend RFRA's constitutionality.

"In short, the judiciary's duty is to say what the law is, but that duty is not exclusive," the appeals court said. "The district court's holding that RFRA usurps the judiciary's power ... to interpret the Constitution is incorrect."

The appeals court also rejected arguments that accommodation of religious practice required by RFRA violates the First Amendment ban on establishment of religion and that RFRA violates the 10th Amendment by intruding on powers reserved to the states.

The appeals court decision was hailed by groups who supported RFRA.

"Lovers of religious liberty are all breathing more easily," said Steven McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom.

He called RFRA "a major foundation of religious liberty in America" and said that without it, "religious Americans would be stripped of protection from overreaching, overregulating governments."

McFarland said that "President Clinton's Justice Department deserves credit for defending RFRA in this case."

Melissa Rogers, associate general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee, said the decision confirms the position of RFRA's drafters that "Congress has the power to enact laws to enhance the protection for constitutional values when the Supreme Court has declined to do so."

"We are extremely gratified that the highest court yet to speak to the issue has upheld RFRA's constitutionality," she said.

The appeals court decision is effective only in the 5th Circuit, which includes Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas, but "should also send a strong signal to other courts that RFRA is good law," Rogers said.

Christian groups call for end to persecution around globe

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Christian leaders encouraged Congress and the Clinton administration to take a more active role in stopping Christian persecution throughout the world.

The religious leaders issued their appeal during a Jan. 23 news conference that followed a seminar on Christian persecution. Seminar participants heard from a panel of experts on "the growing persecutions of Christians in China, Vietnam, Cuba, the Middle East and Northern Africa." The leaders also pointed fingers at themselves for apathy toward the persecution.

Chuck Colson, former Nixon aide and president of Prison Ministries, said the leaders were driven to "repent at our indifference and lack of concern and moral outrage over the absolutely scandalous silence of the Christian community toward the persecution of Christians worldwide."

Colson said both the White House and the Congress have shown inadequate concern for the issue. "A plague on both your houses," Colson said. He added that too often the State Department says, 'Don't bring your Bible to Beijing, because it will offend the Chinese.' Well, we say, "Offend them."

A mountain of evidence supports claims of persecution, said Nina Shea director of the Freedom House's Puebla Program on Religious Freedom. She said that in Sudan, Christians have been nailed to trees and boys have been forced by the government to convert to Islam. The Freedom House sponsored the conference.

The religious leaders acknowledged the leadership of Michael Horowitz, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. In a July essay published in the Wall Street Journal, Horowitz wrote, "Christians in Islamic countries are increasingly imperiled for their beliefs." Horowitz, who was raised an Orthodox Jew, said the U.S. government has ignored Christians' plight in those countries.

Donald Argue, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, presented a "statement of conscience" that he discussed with President Clinton in a recent meeting. Argue said he affirmed the president for his stand in Bosnia, but called for an end to America's indifference toward global Christian persecution.

In the statement, the NAE said, "We know that the United States government has within its power and discretion the capacity to adopt policies that would be dramatically effective in curbing such reigns of terror and protecting the rights of all religious dissidents."

The statement made several recommendations to the government. Among the proposals was the appointment of a special adviser to the president for religious liberty "charged with preparing a report indicating needed changes in policies dealing with religious persecution, and recommending remedial action."

Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Convention's Christian Life Commission, said, "My sensitivity has been heightened to hear of the systematic persecution of my fellow Christians." Land called religious freedom "the fundamental human freedom," which is at the core of Baptist beliefs.

Land said Christians will be monitoring how well government officials respond to their concerns.

"We, who call ourselves Christians, will not only expect, but we will inspect what you do," he said.

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