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**Fellowship OKs chaplaincy plan  
during quiet annual meeting**

By Bob Allen and Greg Warner

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship declared itself "a religious endorsing body" June 28, allowing the group to endorse chaplains without becoming a denomination.

The vote, recommended by the group's Coordinating Council after a two-year study, allows the CBF to resolve the thorny question of chaplain endorsement without taking the step -- rejected last year -- of forming a denomination.

The action came during the CBF's annual general assembly June 26-28 in Louisville, Ky. In other business, the Fellowship elected Missouri layman John Tyler as moderator-elect, approved a \$14.3 million budget, and urged members to skip meals and send funds for famine victims in North Korea.

Registration for the meeting, the seventh general assembly and first in Louisville, totaled 3,565. The largest crowd during any of the three-day sessions was estimated at 4,000.

But unlike this summer's meetings of Southern Baptists, which captured headlines with a boycott of Disney, or American Baptists, which protested a recent religious-liberty ruling by the Supreme Court, there was no lofty or lively debate, in part because the CBF does not adopt resolutions.

Instead the registrants -- younger by comparison to recent CBF assemblies -- gathered to worship, send out new CBF missionaries, hear reports of the CBF's work and conduct business. They dispersed to more than 50 breakout sessions, where they received training in a myriad of ministries or interests.

The topic of chaplains dominated the business sessions, although there was little disagreement about how to handle the issue.

Generally, denominations or conventions endorse chaplains, who then are hired to work in hospitals, the military and other specialized settings. But the Fellowship, a loose-knit organization of individuals and churches, has resisted becoming a convention.

Chaplaincy has become an issue for some moderate Baptists who prefer not to seek endorsement through the North American Mission Board, an agency of the conservative-dominated Southern Baptist Convention.

In 1995 a motion introduced at the CBF's general assembly would have declared CBF a new Baptist convention for the purpose of chaplain endorsement. The motion was rejected, and a subsequent year-long study concluded there was not sufficient interest among Fellowship members to pursue that course.

But that step is not necessary to solve the chaplaincy question, reported Ed Beddingfield of North Carolina, who led the chaplaincy study group. "We would not have to declare ourselves a denomination in order to endorse chaplains," Beddingfield said.

By adopted the specific language of "religious endorsing body," the CBF meets criteria established by the Congress on Ministry in Specialized Settings and other chaplaincy groups, Beddingfield said. Whether or not the U.S. military will accept CBF endorsements remains to be seen, he said.

The CBF will assign endorsement authority to its global missions office, which will screen and recommend chaplains.

The Fellowship also approved a \$14.3 million budget for next year -- money that is contributed by 1,600 Baptist churches and by individuals. The largest portion of the spending plan, \$9.7 million, funds the Fellowship's global missions program. It also includes \$20,000 for the Baptist World Alliance, partially restoring funds cut in an earlier draft of the budget.

Although the Fellowship contributes to BWA, it is not a member of the worldwide Baptist group. The CBF's Coordinating Council will continue to study the Fellowship's relationship with BWA.

The Fellowship unanimously approved a motion from its Texas members to urge individuals to skip one meal a week and send the equivalent cost for famine relief in North Korea.

Although the Fellowship does not pass resolutions, the group wanted to make "a meaningful response" to the crisis, said Pat Anderson, a past moderator of the Fellowship.

Martha Teague Smith of Gastonia, N.C., will lead the Fellowship in 1997-98, succeeding Oklahoma pastor Lavonn Brown as the group's moderator. John Tyler, a Bell Telephone executive from St. Louis, was chosen as moderator-elect to serve in 1998-99.

In a closing sermon interpreting the 1997 general assembly theme, "Blessing the Future," Carolyn Knight, preaching professor at Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, said Christian hope is based on eternal promises of God.

"To bless means to look for the best, to look for a positive outcome, to hope for a better, brighter day," she said.

Such a hope "makes us part of the struggle for a better humanity and a better world," she added, urging Christians to work to make a difference in problems such as economic disparity and violence among young people.

"We can bless the future because God is for us and is with us. We are in God's hands," she said.

In his first major address to a general assembly, Fellowship Coordinator Daniel Vestal called the group "a Fellowship of hope," outlining his vision of a future marked by spirituality, community and commitment to global missions.

He also said he has had to "repent" of his earlier opposition the ordination of women as pastors and deacons, and predicted the Fellowship's openness to women "will attract an increasing number of Baptists because we believe in the wind of the Spirit of God."

In a commissioning service, Global Missions Coordinator Keith Parks urged 11 new CBF missionaries to take up the "towel" of humble service, recalling Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet.

"You may preach powerful sermons and demonstrate amazing technology, but the people of the world will be impacted more when you pick up your towel and get down on your knees than at any other time," Parks told the 11, who join about 150 CBF missionaries already at work around the world.

Next year's general assembly is scheduled June 25-27 in Houston.

## **Vestal says he's changed his mind after once opposing women pastors**

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- In his first major speech before the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship since becoming its coordinator, Daniel Vestal confessed he's had to "repent" for previously opposing women serving as pastors.

Vestal, who assumed the Fellowship's top staff position seven months ago, said he believes the moderate Baptist group's commitment to women in ministry "will attract Baptists who want to see the whole church mobilized for mission and ministry."

But that wasn't always his view, he said in a keynote address to the Fellowship's general assembly June 26 and in a breakout session and news conference the next day.

"There was a time when I didn't believe in women deacons" or pastors, Vestal said. He did not identify a specific date when his view on this issue changed, but he talked about a progressive change of understanding.

"I've not only changed, but I've had to repent and ask God to forgive me," Vestal explained in his speech to the general assembly. "I have not only been shown grace by God but by so many of you, and I'm grateful."

His own transformation on the women's issue was "first and foremost a spiritual process," he said. "It was not political; there was not pressure."

His journey began with a review of B.H. Carroll's interpretation of I Timothy 3, he said. Carroll was the founder and first president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, now located in Fort Worth, Texas. Carroll had female deacons in the church which he served as pastor in Waco, Texas, around the turn of the century, Vestal said.

Even after accepting the validity of women serving as deacons, Vestal said he still struggled with the role of women in pastoral ministry.

The turning point came when he first met a woman pastor face to face and realized she "didn't have horns growing out of her head," he explained. "That flesh and blood encounter made me confront my position."

Despite his own conversion on this issue, Vestal admonished Fellowship members to be patient with others who have not made the same progression.

"Time is on truth's side," he advised. "For some of us it takes time. We're slow learners. All of us need to be patient with each other."

Vestal cited support for women in ministry as one of three reasons why he believes "the Spirit of God is at work" within the Fellowship.

"The wind of the Spirit of God is blowing across the world, calling women, and they are responding," he said. "This fellowship will attract an increasing number of Baptists because we believe in that movement of the Spirit."

Critics of the Fellowship, particularly the new conservative leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, often criticize the Fellowship as the home of liberal Baptists who embrace women pastors and homosexuals.

Although Vestal follows the pattern of other Fellowship leaders who have expressed public support for women in all areas of ministry, he said the tag of being an advocate of homosexuality does not fit.

The only action the Fellowship has taken on the issue was a vote last year by the group's Coordinating Council to defund the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America for declaring itself a "welcoming place" for gays and lesbians. That action left open the possibility of future funding for projects of the peace advocacy group. This year's CBF budget does include funding for a Peace Fellowship event.

When asked in the news conference to describe his own position, Vestal referred to the gospel story of the woman caught in adultery who was brought before Jesus by religious leaders who wanted to stone her. Jesus turned to the angry crowd and declared, "Let him who is without sin cast the first stone."

In reference to homosexuals, he said, "It seems to me we don't want to throw stones at anybody."

However, he quickly added that he "will not do anything that encourages a gay/lesbian lifestyle" because he believes such a lifestyle "violates biblical standards and societal standards."

"I will not do anything that will undercut God's institution of marriage, but neither will I throw stones," he explained.

Rather than embracing homosexuality or throwing stones at homosexuals, he said, the Fellowship "should show grace to those who violate God's standard for marriage."

In the breakout session, Vestal also addressed another question that has dogged the Fellowship from its inception seven years ago: Will the loose-knit organization of moderate Southern Baptists become a separate convention or denomination?

"Our mission is not to be a convention, but to be a network," he said, emphasizing the need to connect individuals and churches in ministry without producing uniform programming.

A convention is "a bureaucratic, top-down model" and an old paradigm, Vestal said. Instead of that, the Fellowship emphasizes a three-dimensional "molecular structure" of networking and providing resources.

The goal of this model is "to mobilize Baptist Christians and Baptist ministries," Vestal said.

Understanding this requires a different way of thinking than Southern Baptists have known in the past, he added. "In the convention model, the primary way we cooperated was through owning institutions. In the Fellowship model, we do not own and operate institutions. The key word is partnering."

Vestal is the Fellowship's second coordinator. In January, he succeeded Cecil Sherman in that role. Vestal previously was pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston; Dunwoody Baptist Church in Atlanta; and First Baptist Church of Midland, Texas.

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## **Parks urges new missionaries to take up 'towel' of service**

By Marv Knox

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Christians can change the world with a towel, not a sword, Keith Parks told the latest crew of missionaries appointed by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

On the night before Christ's crucifixion, he took a towel and washed his disciples' feet in an act of humble service, Parks reminded 11 new missionaries who were appointed during the Fellowship's 1997 general assembly in Louisville, Ky.

"Jesus picked up a towel, not a Torah (the Hebrew scriptures) or even a sword" to demonstrate what the gospel was all about, said Parks, the Fellowship's global missions coordinator. And Christians can do the same thing today, he added.

Parks told about a missionary who had invested his life in steadfastly getting to know and serve the needs of a community of non-Christians in a foreign country. The missionary visited with a native resident of the area who thanked him for his love and service and told the missionary, "That is the way this village will be won to Jesus."

And that is the way the world will be won, Parks added. Admonishing the new missionaries to demonstrate God's love through humble service, he told them: "You may preach powerful sermons and demonstrate amazing technology. ... But the people of the world will be impacted more when you pick up your towel and get down on your knees than at any other time."

The Fellowship particularly has targeted its mission effort at unreached people groups in "World A," the nations and regions most closed to the Christian gospel. The laws and customs of many of those countries are designed to keep the gospel out of their lands, but Christian love is stronger, Parks said.

Government officials and anti-Christian leaders in those places "cannot stop you from revealing God's love through acts of kindness," he stressed. Besides, if humble service "is good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for his followers," he added.

Participants in the Fellowship meeting saw a living demonstration of that as they heard from Bert and Debbie Ayers and their children. For the past four years, the Ayerses have served in Albania, the formerly communist Eastern European country once known as the most atheistic nation on earth.

Time after time, Albanian people would ask the Ayerses why well-off Americans would leave the comforts of their country to live in impoverished Albania, Bert Ayers reported. The missionaries always told them, "We are here because Jesus first loved us, and now we love you."

Chaos in Albania forced the Ayerses and other missionaries to evacuate. While fleeing the country, Debbie Ayers was injured by a bullet to the head. She is now recovered. Although missionaries are gone from the country, Bert Ayers said, Christians there continue to serve people and reach them in the name of Jesus.

Participants also saw first-hand the results of Fellowship missions efforts when they met Zeki Amedi, a Kurdish Muslim from Iraq who was led to faith in Christ through the ministry of Fellowship missionaries Robert and Ronni Anderson.

Amedi, who has immigrated to the United States to escape persecution of the Kurds by the Iraqi government, thanked the Fellowship for providing funds to help reach his people for Christ. And he pleaded for prayer for persecuted Kurdish people still living in Iraq.

The Fellowship supports about 150 missionaries around the globe, Parks reported. And although all of the 11 new missionaries will be based in the United States, "all of them will impact the world" with their specialized ministries, he said.

The new missionaries are:

-- Luis and Patricia Ancarola, former mission volunteers who will work with impoverished people in Homestead, Fla., outside Miami.

-- Pam Light, who said she felt God calling her to missions at age 6, when her parents were appointed foreign missionaries. She will serve AIDS patients in Miami.

-- Philip and Shantel Vestal, who will coordinate the Fellowship's adopt-a-people-group program, which is designed to link local churches with people groups around the world that have not been reached by the gospel. They will be based in Charlotte, N.C. Philip is the son of CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal.

-- Matt and Miriam Wallace, who will coordinate "secure communication" for the Fellowship's missionaries. From a base in the Dallas area, they will work to make sure the Fellowship's computer communication links with missionaries are protected so that anti-Christian forces in "World A" countries cannot intercept the messages and use them to persecute Christians there.

-- Laquita and Larry Wynn will return to Miami to direct the Touching Miami with Love ministry center in one of the city's poorest communities. She was a volunteer there when he was a newspaper executive for the *Miami Herald*, and they both sensed the call to missions and ministry. They received the opportunity to return when Butch and Nell Green, Fellowship missionaries who have directed the center, transferred to Belgium.

-- David and Robbie Young will be international coordinators for information technology, training Fellowship missionaries to utilize computers most effectively from their base in the Washington, D.C., area.

## **Purpose of worship must govern new methods, scholars advise**

By Marv Knox and Greg Warner

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The purpose and integrity of worship must not take a back seat to technology and cultural trends, according to workshop leaders at the recent Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly.

Two hour-long workshops June 27 focused on trends in worship, a topic that is stirring more than a little controversy in Baptist churches.

Bill Leonard, dean of the divinity school at Wake Forest University, urged Christians to "look underneath" changing practices and technology and evaluate how the changes impact the purpose and mission of the church.

As an example, he noted a Texas megachurch has considered using hologram technology to project a three-dimensional image of its pastor to the worship center of the church's second site.

The plan would allow the "virtual image" of the pastor to deliver a sermon, even though he would not be present at the service. But it could also project a negative message about the availability of the pastor to the church members, Leonard warned.

Likewise, new prepackaged "disposable communion" sets -- which offer grape juice sealed in a tiny cup with a bread wafer inserted in the cup lid -- could dilute the spiritual significance of communion.

"What is the church to make of these new measures?" asked Leonard, a leading American church historian.

On one level, change is nothing new, he said. He cited such long-ago changes as "field preaching" outside the church walls and the use of hymns rather than the singing of biblical psalms, which now seem commonplace and accepted.

Some changes in worship help churches get the attention of religious seekers who have been hostile to formal religion, Leonard said, but congregations must consider how those changes affect the nature and purpose of worship.

"Christianity is a pilgrimage" between a sense of God's nearness and God's vast pervasiveness, he said. He urged against extreme positions that diminish either element in God's character.

In a separate workshop, seminary professor Molly Marshall outlined five principles to guard the integrity of worship:

-- Worship must be faithful to the Word of God.

-- Worship must be in touch with the roots from which it has sprung.

-- Worship must be expressive of contemporary culture. It is "rehearsal for life" and must deal with the issues people face, said Marshall, a professor at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

-- Worship should "engage the fullness of our lives." It should involve the senses and employ the aesthetic, she said.

-- Worship must include all members of the community.

Marshall also said the way we talk about God is important. Using only masculine images and words for God can create the wrong impression. "All language for God is anthropomorphic," she said. "We need to be careful ... lest we communicate that men are more like God than women," she warned.

## **Vestal asks CBF foundation to consider endowment campaign**

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Coordinator Daniel Vestal has asked the board of directors of the CBF Foundation to prepare a recommendation on a major endowment campaign for CBF.

Vestal said CBF has "a window of opportunity before us to provide for our future and the future of those who partner with us," according to Ruben Swint, foundation president.

Swint said Vestal told the directors that pressing needs of CBF include global missions and theological education.

Vestal made the request at a breakfast meeting of the foundation's Fellowship Heritage Society, June 28, in Louisville, Ky. He asked the foundation directors to present their report to the CBF Coordinating Council at its February meeting in Atlanta.

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-- By Robert O'Brien

## **American Baptists 'lament' Supreme Court ruling**

By Bob Allen

INDIANAPOLIS (ABP) -- The American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., passed a statement lamenting a June 25 Supreme Court decision striking down the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

In response to the ruling, delegates at the denomination's biennial convention in Indianapolis adopted a statement of concern on the "free exercise of religion." The statement said delegates "lament" the ruling and urged Congress to "find an appropriate legislative vehicle to reassert a clear constitutional guarantee of the free exercise of religion."

"The intent of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act was to reclaim the high constitutional standard requiring government to demonstrate a compelling interest in order to restrict the free exercise of religion," the statement said.

James Dunn, head of the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty organization supported by national Baptist groups including American Baptists, told reporters "what the court has done is gut the First Amendment" by effectively eliminating the clause guaranteeing the free exercise of religion.

"The words 'free exercise' are meaningless tonight because of the action of the Supreme Court this morning," Dunn said.

Daniel Weiss, general secretary of the 1.5 million-member denomination, said the ruling "will make it much more difficult for many people to worship without a justifiable concern that their government may unduly seek to influence or restrict how they live out their faith."

In other business, 2,004 delegates to the June 24-27 convention elected a new president to lead American Baptists during the 1998-1999 biennium. James Johnson, a retired minister from Alderson, W.Va., was elected to succeed retiring president Elaine Smith, an attorney from Washington.

Other new officers include Trinette McCray, a campus minister from Milwaukee, vice president; and Kenneth Hines of Rochester, N.Y., budget review officer.

In an address to delegates, Weiss affirmed American Baptists' fidelity to the Bible but warned against legalistic interpretations.

Some critics blame liberal theology for membership decline in mainline churches, which include American Baptists. Not all such criticism is from outside. The 5-year-old American Baptist Evangelicals distributed materials at the meeting calling for "renewal" of American Baptist Churches and "a return to the Word of God and the principle of Sola Scriptura," the idea that the Bible is the sole authority for faith.

"There is at times some confusion about where American Baptists stand with regards to the Bible and its authority," Weiss said. "The fact is that we are and always have been a people of the Book. We repeatedly have affirmed our fidelity to the authority of Scripture."

He urged American Baptists, however, to avoid elevating the Bible to an object of faith.

"Do not make the mistake of putting Jesus Christ and the Bible in the wrong order of authority," Weiss said. "We respect and revere the Bible, but we worship Jesus Christ."

Despite Baptists' respect for the Bible, they must acknowledge they don't have a corner on interpreting its message, Weiss said.

"As your general secretary I hear from people who are convinced there is only one way to interpret Scripture," Weiss said. "Ordinarily, it is their way."

"Now it may be true there is only one correct way to interpret the Bible, but how do we find it? I get uncomfortable with suggestions that somehow a vote by a body of Baptists will determine the correct interpretation of the Bible for all the rest."

Rather than using biblical "proof-texts" that often support human prejudices rather than divine truth, Weiss said the Bible must be interpreted as a call to compassion.

"I don't believe that in this life Jesus expected a pure church," Weiss said. "I don't think a pure church is possible. But Jesus did long for a compassionate church, one that truly would be his body to carry out his ministry of mercy, compassion and hope. And that kind of church is possible."

In addition to the statement on religious liberty, delegates adopted other statements of concern. They agreed to:

- Decry desecration of houses of worship. The statement calls for prosecution of offenders and support for people whose churches have been desecrated or burned and urges American Baptists to help rebuild burnt churches and help prevent future arson attacks.

- Affirm church leadership, urging churches to use pastoral relations committees which meet regularly to affirm and support ministers and hold them accountable.

- Call on churches to develop and implement ministries in their communities.

- Affirm ties with Christians in Hong Kong in light of the July 1 transfer of the British colony to the People's Republic of China and pledged "the solidarity of prayer" with Hong Kong Christians.

- Speak out on behalf of immigrants and refugees.

- Ask Russian President Boris Yeltsin to veto a bill limiting religious freedom for minority groups in the country.

- Support U.S. sanctions against Nigeria's military dictatorship.

- Call for addressing church conflict with "humility and harmony." Specific recommendations call for "reaffirming the fundamental tenets" of American Baptist faith and polity, dialogue on "common-ground" issues and working to build community.

## Supreme Court upholds laws banning assisted suicide

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Physician-assisted suicide is not a constitutional right, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled June 26.

Ruling in two separate cases, justices decided unanimously that laws in New York and Washington state outlawing assisted suicide do not violate the Constitution.

The ruling reversed decisions of two federal appeals courts which had ruled both laws unconstitutional. Religious groups and President Bill Clinton hailed the Supreme Court ruling.

Physicians and gravely ill patients in New York challenged the state's assisted-suicide ban. The state allows competent patients to refuse life-sustaining medical treatment. The plaintiffs said doctor-assisted suicide is essentially the same thing and argued that the state law violated their equal protection under the law.

Writing for the court, however, Chief Justice William Rehnquist rejected the equal-protection argument.

"Everyone, regardless of physical condition, is entitled, if competent, to refuse unwanted lifesaving medical treatment; no one is permitted to assist a suicide," Rehnquist wrote in the opinion joined by Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Antonin Scalia, Anthony Kennedy and Clarence Thomas.

The court noted that "when a patient refuses life-sustaining medical treatment, he dies from an underlying fatal disease or pathology; but if a patient ingests lethal medication prescribed by a physician, he is killed by that medication."

In the Washington-state case, opponents of the state's ban on assisted suicide charged that the law placed an undue burden on their exercise of constitutional liberties.

The court rejected that challenge, saying it lacked "careful description" of how liberties were compromised by the law.

While the court clearly allowed states to implement laws banning assisted suicide, the ruling and its five concurring opinions left the door open for states to legalize the practice of assisted suicide.

"Our holding permits this debate to continue, as it should in a democratic society," the ruling concluded.

In a concurring opinion, Justice Stevens wrote that a state "like Washington that has authorized the death penalty and thereby has concluded that the sanctity of human life does not require that it always be preserved, must acknowledge that there are situations in which an interest in hastening death is legitimate."

"Indeed, not only is that interest sometimes legitimate, I am also convinced that there are times when it is entitled to constitutional protection."

Oregon has enacted an initiative legalizing physician-assisted suicide for competent terminally ill adults.

Reaction to the rulings in *Vacco vs. Quill* and *Washington v. Glucksberg* was swift from the White House.

President Clinton hailed the decision saying he believes physician-assisted suicide is wrong. "The decision is a victory for all Americans -- it prevents us from going down a very dangerous and troubling path on this difficult and often agonizing issue," he said.

Mark Chopko, general counsel for the U.S. Bishops at the U.S. Catholic Conference, said the "clarity of these decisions should serve as a benchmark for other courts facing the same issue in this country and around the world."

He said the court confirmed "that assisted suicide could undermine the trust in the physician-patient relationship by blurring the time-honored distinction between healing and harming."