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Fellowship declines to oppose SBC statement on family

By Bob Allen

HOUSTON (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, though on record as affirming women, declined to oppose a recent Southern Baptist Convention statement urging wives to "submit graciously" to their husbands.

The SBC recently added an article on families to its official doctrinal statement, the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message." The controversial new article defines families in terms of a lifelong marriage between a man and woman, calls on wives to submit to their husband's "servant leadership" and emphasizes "discipline" of children.

The Fellowship, a 7-year-old moderate group formed in reaction to a conservative takeover of the SBC, held its annual meeting two weeks later in Houston.

During the June 25-27 General Assembly, Fellowship members Jennifer Scarborough, Stacey Simpson and Jim Strickland introduced a motion asking the Fellowship to go on record as affirming that "the family exists wherever God has called people together in a loving covenantal relationship," that marriage partners are "to be mutually submissive to each other" and that children "are a gift of God, to be loved, nurtured and guided by home, church and community."

In accordance with CBF rules, the trio submitted the motion for review by the advisory council of the Fellowship's Coordinating Council. The advisory group concluded the motion "sounded much like a resolution," council member Robert Whitten reported during a plenary session.

Fellowship bylaws do not allow resolutions, non-binding position statements approved by voting members at the annual meeting. After meeting with the makers, the advisory council suggested an alternative motion that the Coordinating Council "study and report on issues surrounding family and children," said Whitten, pastor of Westwood Baptist Church in Springfield, Va.

During a breakout session to discuss the advisory council motion, Strickland, pastor of Heritage Baptist Church in Cartersville, Ga., complained the original motion had been "emasculated by leadership" out of a desire not to confront the Southern Baptist Convention.

David Waugh, pastor of Metro Baptist Church in New York City, proposed an amendment asking that the Coordinating Council "in light of our previously stated positions, which affirm both the equality of both genders before God in church and society and the autonomy of the local church, study the impact of the recently approved article to the 'Baptist Faith and Message' on families" and report findings back to the 1999 General Assembly.

"What has happened is one body has spoken for the whole, which we are part of, but we don't affirm [the statement]," said Waugh, a former Coordinating Council member.

During a 55-minute discussion, the 70-member breakout group first rejected Waugh's amendment 55-14 and then voted nearly unanimously against the advisory council motion. Later, the advisory council concurred with the breakout group, opting not to recommend its motion to the full General Assembly.

During discussion in the breakout session, opponents argued the Fellowship should not set a precedent of passing motions that have the effect of a resolution and that the group should not concern itself with actions of the SBC.

"I think we would have a unanimous statement regarding gender equality," said Larry Dipboye, pastor of First Baptist Church in Oak Ridge, Tenn. "The image I'm dealing with is I go to CBF meetings to fight with the SBC."

"I also don't like to come to Cooperative Baptist meetings to fight with other entities I don't have anything to do with," responded Simpson, pastor of Fellowship Baptist Church in Edison, Ga. "The SBC has made a statement to which much of society is listening."

"I think we have an opportunity to say something relevant and positive," she said.

Pat Burnette of First Baptist Church in Greenwood, S.C., said no response is needed to the SBC family article. "Everybody has made so much fun of it that I don't think we need to answer it at all."

Sanford Smith, a layman and member of Southeast Baptist Church in Greensboro, N.C., said it would be a mistake to "make any kind of statement on behalf of our local churches."

"I think the local churches in their own community will have a greater impact than anything we can do here," he said.

"I think David's got a good amendment to a bad motion," said Pat Anderson of Lakeland, Fla., a past CBF moderator. "Two things are paramount here. One is how does CBF speak to any issue. Now the SBC boys, they've got a technique for that. They get an SBC resolution and blame women for sin, and blame Disney for promiscuity, now they'll blame insubmissive wives for the breakdown of the family."

"Do we want the CBF to become a similar type forum? Next year, and the year after and the year after, will we have to speak to whatever the SBC has done?"

Anderson said the Fellowship's record of including women in top leadership positions speaks for itself. Both the Fellowship's outgoing moderator and its moderator-elect are women, as are 29 of 82 voting members of the Coordinating Council.

"We don't have to prove ourselves to anybody by statements," agreed Joe Hairston, a Coordinating Council member from Washington, D.C. "The way we live our lives is the best way to tell the world [what we believe]."

Still, makers of the original motion contended the Fellowship needed to make some kind of statement.

"No matter what the SBC says or CBF or anyone else, I have a large group of secular friends to whom I have to apologize for what Baptists have done," said Jennifer Scarborough, a sponsor of the original motion. "They're not coming into our church because of what that [statement] represents."

"We need some statement that says there is a group of Baptists that does not agree with everything they say," said Scarborough, a staff member at First Baptist Church in Morrow, Ga., and a student at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta.

Simpson, 27, said in an interview she is "coming from a different generation" than Fellowship members who were active in the conservative-moderate battle for control of the nation's largest Protestant faith group during the 1980s. "We don't have those fears" of being perceived as anti-SBC, she said.

Though the Fellowship balked at taking an official stance on the SBC statement on family, the group's top executive offered his views on the subject in a statement written prior to the General Assembly.

"As I understand Scripture, marriage is a companionship between husband and wife, not a hierarchy," Fellowship Coordinator Daniel Vestal said in a news release included in a press kit distributed at the General Assembly. "It requires mutual submission and sacrifice. It calls for shared responsibility and respect, not the exercise of authority and control."

Vestal said the Fellowship has taken no official position on whether women should be pastors of Baptist churches, but he believes personally that "women leaders should be embraced by the church and that they are essential to God's plan."

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CBF General Assembly focuses on spirituality

By Bob Allen

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Absent a heavy business agenda, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship turned much of its attention to a more rudimentary issue in its June 25-27 General Assembly in Houston.

The 1998 meeting, themed "Celebrate the Spirit," included 14 workshops on spiritual formation and an extended general session with Richard Foster, author of the best-selling "Celebration of Discipline" and other books.

"The inward journey of focus upon Jesus Christ as our everlasting savior, lord and friend and the upward journey into intimacy with God, who loves and cares for us, of necessity compels us into the outward journey of a broken and hurting world," Foster said.

Foster, a Quaker, affirmed "the great Baptist heritage of outreach."

"You don't take a back seat to anybody," he said to the CBF audience.

Citing examples including evangelist Billy Graham, Foster also mentioned two Houston pastors, John Bisagno and Ed Young. Ironically, both are leaders in the conservative faction of the Southern Baptist Convention which most vehemently opposes the Fellowship.

"It's a wonderful heritage you have," Foster said. "Never lose it. Never allow your internal struggles to distance you from the great heritage of outreach. Keep reaching out. The world needs the outreach you have."

In a business session, the General Assembly adopted a 1998-99 budget of \$14.8 million, up from \$14.3 million this year.

Sixty-three percent of expenditures in the spending plan are earmarked for global missions. Fourteen percent goes to Baptist principles, which includes seminaries. Four percent is for church resources, 6 percent for communications and marketing, 2 percent for "networking" with state CBF organizations, 1 percent for the CBF Foundation, 9 percent for administration and 1 percent for reserves.

Finance committee chair Ed Vick said Fellowship leaders are "cautiously optimistic" the organization will finish this year in the black, after running a deficit last year. Next year's budget calls for spending at 90 percent of budget levels during the first six months of the fiscal year, allowing for mid-year adjustment should income be below projections.

Other business included the adoption of bylaw changes aimed at increasing ethnic representation on the Fellowship's Coordinating Council and the establishment of a retirement and annuity program for ministers and employers of member churches.

The plan would offer an alternative for ministers who do not desire or are ineligible to participate in retirement programs of the Southern Baptist Convention Annuity Board, according to a printed rationale statement. The Fellowship already offers a missions program and supports a variety of moderate alternatives to official denominational programs of the conservative-led SBC.

The recommendation is the first step in establishing a retirement plan, which must be approved by the Internal Revenue Service. "The steps are in process and are now in the hands of the IRS," said Jane Tuten, chair of the Fellowship's administration ministry group. "We await some ruling from them."

Sarah Frances Anders, a retired sociology professor at Louisiana College, was elected moderator-elect to lead the Fellowship in 1999-2000. John Tyler, a communications executive from Webster Groves, Mo., will be

moderator the coming year. Tyler succeeds Martha Smith of Gastonia, N.C., who completed her term as moderator at the close of the Houston meeting.

In remarks to the General Assembly, Smith reported that the Fellowship's current coordinator, Daniel Vestal, has been on the job 19 months; the group's current missionary count stands at 143; a hunger-relief fund for North Korea has collected \$113,000; and that state and regional Fellowship networks continue to develop.

"Some folks have expressed disappointment that CBF is not all that is has hoped to be," Smith said. "Brothers and sisters, I am not disappointed. ... CBF is alive and well. CBF is growing in all the right ways."

"CBF offers a new way to be Baptist," she said.

In a state-of-the-Fellowship address, Vestal described the organization as "a people of love and devotion to the Lord and to neighbors and the world" and a "fellowship of freedom."

"We were born in a struggle for freedom and in our brief history we have been champions for freedom," Vestal said.

The Fellowship formed in 1991 after moderates withdrew from a prolonged struggle against a conservative faction for control of the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group. Opposing Southern Baptist conservatives who argued the Bible is literally true, moderates rallied around the right of individual Baptists and local churches to interpret Scripture for themselves.

"Dangers that threaten our freedom," Vestal said, include:

-- "The tyranny of the past," or the desire to return to old and familiar methods. "God set us free from that tyranny," he said. "We must not try to create the past or restore the past."

-- "Attentiveness about the present." Vestal said he continues to meet with pastors who say they personally support the Fellowship but "have to be careful" about offending some members of their churches. "Whatever happened to boldness? Whatever happened to courage? Whatever happened to conscience?" Vestal asked.

He also described "whining and murmurings and complaining" that exist among Fellowship members. "The disposition of a free people ought to be one of boundless joy," he said.

-- "Timidity about the future."

"For those of us who call ourselves a people of faith, it's amazing how much fear we have," Vestal said. "As a free people, we must let go of the past, we must joyfully embrace the present and we must move toward the future."

"In our brief history, I look back and I marvel at what has happened in seven years," Vestal said. "At this present hour, I look around and I am at times overwhelmed at what God is doing now."

"And I look to the future and I at times can hardly contain myself," he continued. "We ain't seen nothin' yet."

Final registration for the meeting was 2,925, below projections after a series of rallies across Texas aimed at countering negative publicity and encouraging people to attend the Houston meeting.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Other stories related to the CBF General Assembly to come.

High court OKs decency standards in federal arts funding process

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The National Endowment for the Arts can consider general standards of decency when determining which art projects it funds, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled June 25.

Eight justices voted to uphold a provision enacted by Congress in 1990 that calls on the NEA chairman to consider "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs and values of the American public" when judging the artistic excellence and merit of grant applications.

Congress enacted the provision after an uproar over NEA-funded exhibits by photographer Robert Mapplethorpe and artist Andres Serrano in 1989. Drawing criticism were a Mapplethorpe exhibit that included homoerotic photographs condemned as pornographic by members of Congress and a Serrano photograph of a crucifix immersed in urine.

The decency-and-respect provision was challenged by four performing artists -- Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes and Tim Miller -- who contended that their First Amendment rights were violated when their funding applications were denied.

Two lower courts sided with the artists, but the Supreme Court reversed those rulings. The majority opinion written by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor and joined by five colleagues concluded that the decency-and-respect provision does not inherently interfere with First Amendment rights.

O'Connor wrote that the provision merely "admonishes the NEA to take 'decency and respect' into consideration" and that its "advisory language" does not impose an outright ban on funding.

NEA officials say they have sought to comply with the provision by ensuring diverse membership on its peer review panels.

The court majority acknowledged it would be confronted with a different case if the challenged provision were used by the NEA to penalize disfavored viewpoints.

"Unless and until [the provision] is applied in a manner that raises concern about the suppression of disfavored viewpoints, however, we uphold the constitutionality of the provision."

The court's most conservative jurists took issue with the majority's characterization of the provision as "advisory."

In a concurring opinion joined by Justice Clarence Thomas, Justice Antonin Scalia said the majority opinion sustained the constitutionality of decency and respect provision "by gutting it."

"General standards of decency and respect for Americans' beliefs and values must ... be taken into account," Scalia wrote.

He called the NEA's method of compliance by selecting diverse review panels "so obviously inadequate that it insults the intelligence."

Scalia said the provision "must be evaluated as written, rather than as distorted by the agency it was meant to control. By its terms, it established content- and viewpoint-based criteria upon which grant applications are to be evaluated. And that is perfectly constitutional."

The court's lone dissenter, Justice David Souter, said the decency-and-respect provision should be struck down because it is "substantially overbroad and carries with it a significant power to chill artistic production and display."