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Fellowship begins process to find Parks' successor

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Six years ago, as one of the most recognized and respected figures in the Southern Baptist Convention, Keith Parks brought instant credibility to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship when he became the new moderate group's first global-missions coordinator.

Now, with 140 missionaries and the SBC power struggle which gave it birth in the past, the Atlanta-based CBF must find a replacement for Parks, who plans to retire next year.

The Fellowship's Coordinating Council appointed a search committee to seek a successor to Parks, 71, and reflected on his contribution to the group at its Oct. 15-17 meeting in Atlanta.

Parks came to the Fellowship in 1993 after retiring as president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board over philosophical differences with conservative trustees who had attained a majority on the agency's board.

The Fellowship had formed two years earlier to provide moderate alternatives for missions and other denominational programs captured by conservatives during a power shift in the SBC during the 1980s.

CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal said Parks' decision to take the Fellowship position "was a defining moment" for the then-fledgling organization. "In some ways it was a legitimizing moment," Vestal added.

Under Parks' leadership, Vestal said, "CBF has become a significant participant in the world missions enterprise."

John Tyler, the Fellowship's moderator, said Parks is leaving behind a healthy global missions operation. "Our future is very bright because of the foundation that Keith laid," Tyler said.

Parks announced to the Coordinating Council's advisory council Sept. 18 that he plans to retire Feb. 28. However, he told the council's global missions ministry group Oct. 16 he might extend his service until June.

Coordinating Council member Sanford Smith will chair a search committee for a new global-missions coordinator. Other members of the search committee are: Daniel Vestal, CBF coordinator; council members Jane Tuten, Beverly Greer and Jim Baucom; and Julie Pennington-Russell, a pastor in Waco, Texas.

"One of the generative forces of CBF has been its missions interest and its missions efforts," Parks told the Coordinating Council.

He said the Fellowship's missions program is "distinctive" in that it does not distinguish between home and foreign missions, focuses on people groups rather than nations, concentrates on poor and "unreached" peoples, groups missionaries in self-directed teams, uses secure electronic networks for communications between missionaries and staff, and networks and cooperates with other "Great Commission" Christian groups.

He identified seven "challenges" facing the Fellowship's global missions program in the future:

-- Maintaining and strengthening the team approach to missions. The use of self-governing teams "is not the normal way" to administer missions, Parks said, and the temptation will remain to make decisions from the top down. "I think this is a real challenge, to avoid turning to the comfort zones of the past," he said.

-- Proportionate financial support for missions. "The struggle in determining financial support for missions is a given," Parks said. Part of the problem, he said, is definition. "Some want to identify the 'mission of the church' with the missions expression of Christians," he said. "This violates and impoverishes the meaning of both."

"Another problem area is that typically the proportion of support from the constituents is greater than the proportion of missions advocates in the financial decision-making patterns of CBF," he said.

-- Categories of missions personnel. While the Fellowship will need to capitalize on trends toward short-term and hands-on mission involvement, there must be an intentional effort to maintain the "incarnational" model of career missionaries who speak the language and live in the midst of people groups.

-- Maintaining the distinctiveness of the CBF's missions program. "Our focus is deliberately on the least of the least, the disenfranchised, the poor, the neglected, those who cannot be advocates for themselves and generally have few advocates," Parks said. He said it will take "an intensified and determined effort" to maintain that focus. "You cannot maintain distinctiveness of a new approach and return to all the things we used to do," he said. "You can't do both."

-- Communicating global missions, through missions-education materials and other means, in order to stimulate interest and support for CBF missions.

-- Maintaining priorities and strategies while working in an increasing number of partnerships with individuals and entities "who have personalized interests but would like CBF identification."

-- Maintaining security of missionaries while adequately informing constituents. Many of the Fellowship's missionaries minister in sensitive areas which make it necessary to discuss their work only in general terms. In some cases, they are identified only as "missionaries A and B" or as working with an unnamed people group. While constituents desire information that is more specific, "if we do that, we'll jeopardize and cancel much of what we're doing," Parks said.

In other business, the Coordinating Council began a 1999-2000 budget-development process with a "cautious optimism" that has progressed from a recurring theme to an inside joke among Fellowship leaders. In the past, Fellowship leaders have proposed aggressive budgets, based on rapid income growth, only to cut back mid-year when contributions from churches and individuals leveled off.

Undesignated gifts during the 1997-98 fiscal year were up 7 percent over the previous year, and an annual offering for global missions was up 12 percent, said David Currie, chairman of the council's finance ministry group. During the first quarter of the current fiscal year, receipts ran nearly 10 percent ahead of last year, he said.

"We have some rejoicing to do," Currie said. "I think we have really turned a corner financially."

Gary Skeen, the Fellowship's financial coordinator, said both the number of churches contributing to the Fellowship and amounts from churches that have contributed in the past are up.

According to a report in the Fellowship's September 1998 newsletter, total contributions for 1997-98 were \$14,679,339, up \$1.4 million, the largest increase in four years. A total of 1,682 churches gave money to the Fellowship last year, 67 more than the previous year.

Since last summer's general assembly in Houston, the Fellowship picked up 41 new contributing churches in Texas alone, said Bill Bruster, the organization's networking coordinator.

During his coordinator's report, Vestal highlighted four Fellowship task groups that are "dealing with significant issues that we feel face Baptist life:" One deals with Christian spirituality and spiritual formation and another with "reference and referral" to help ministers find jobs. A new task group will look at starting new churches to affiliate with CBF, Vestal said, and another will emphasize student ministries.

WMU head released from hospital two weeks after suffering stroke

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Dellanna O'Brien, executive director of Woman's Missionary Union, was released from a hospital Oct. 13, two-and-one-half weeks after suffering what doctors called a mild stroke.

O'Brien, 65, will continue to receive physical therapy as an outpatient, according to a spokesperson at the Southern Baptist Convention auxiliary in Birmingham, Ala.

In a statement, O'Brien said she expected to slowly begin to resume duties in a few weeks. She said she is learning to walk with a brace, her speech is "reasonably clear" and she is regaining use of her right arm. "My hand is not responding much, but I am becoming a very good lefty."

Wanda Lee, national president of WMU and a registered nurse, told employees of the auxiliary Oct. 14 that O'Brien "is past the crisis stage" and "is now in the recovery stage" of her stroke. She predicted O'Brien will recover fully.

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-- By ABP staff

Congress approves persecution measure; sends bill to president

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Congress has approved a bill to curb religious persecution abroad, after backers agreed to give the president more flexibility in dealing with countries that permit religious persecution.

The Freedom From Religious Persecution Act now heads to President Clinton, who is expected to sign the measure into law. The Senate approved the measure Oct. 9, after it was softened to satisfy administration concerns, on a 98-0 vote. The House, which had earlier adopted a tougher bill, approved the Senate changes Oct. 10 on a voice vote.

The final bill differed significantly from an initial bill introduced by Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va. The bill had originally called for the creation of a White House office that could impose automatic sanctions on countries which permit religious persecution. But opponents including several religious groups sought changes, contending that parts of the original bill could actually increase persecution. The business community also lobbied to soften trade sanctions that could hamper free trade.

The revised bill provides greater flexibility to the president in imposing penalties on other countries. It also houses the new religious persecution office in the State Department instead of the White House.

The Senate changes were sponsored by Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla., to appease Republican and Democratic opponents of automatic sanctions and other provisions in the House bill.

Other provisions sought by supporters of the original bill have been stripped, including sanctions against Sudan and immigration provisions.

Nickles said the "purpose is not to punish anybody; it's to promote religious freedom."

While voting for final passage of the measure, Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., an original co-sponsor of the House bill, said the Senate amendments "somewhat weakened our bill."

While the House bill gave the president "a great deal of flexibility" concerning sanctions, Smith said, the Senate version "stretches flexibility almost to the breaking point."

During Senate debate, however, Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said imposing the same penalties on the estimated 70 nations which violate, abuse or proscribe religious freedom could "have a myriad of consequences we don't intend."

Hatch said the Senate version's "detailed and considered list of incremental actions" coupled with "selective waiver authorities" make the bill "both substantive and flexible."

Sen. Russell Feingold, D-Wis., raised lingering concerns that the bill might establish a hierarchy of human rights. "As we defend the freedom of religion, should we not just as vigorously defend the rule of law, basic human rights and the exercise of political rights?" he said.

The Senate bill would mandate two entities to combat religious persecution: a State Department office headed by an ambassador at large; and an independent commission appointed by the president and Congress. The commission would be given \$3 million in operating funds.

A third entity -- a special adviser on religious persecution in the National Security Council at the White House -- is merely suggested by the bill.

The commission would issue an annual country-by-country report on religious persecution. The president could either impose penalties on countries engaged in persecution or use the broad waiver authority to do nothing. The president could waive penalties if the foreign government has ceased the violations; if waiving actions would further the purpose of the bill; or if important national interests of the United States justified the waiver.

The president could choose from a menu of penalties, ranging from a private demarche to restricting loans and products to and from those countries. The president could also choose to take other "commensurate action" in lieu of any of the menu items.

The measure calls for further training of foreign-service officers and refugee and asylum personnel. It also provides equal access to embassies for U.S. citizens for religious activities on terms no less favorable than for other nongovernmental activities.

A final point of disagreement delaying passage of the bill was resolved when lawmakers agreed to change the timing of the commission's report on religious persecution abroad. Under the approved measure the report would be released before the president is required to act.

Steven McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for law and Religious Freedom, said the timing of the report would "help ensure accountability for action or inaction by the administration."

"Due to political realities in the Senate, this is a more modest bill" than the original version, McFarland said. However, "It retains the essential element of accountability for the president's actions," he added.

While the National Association of Evangelicals supported the final bill, spokesman Rich Cizick acknowledged, it "is not in every respect what we all wanted."

"My logic in the legislative process is to always put forward your most ambitious proposal first, knowing that you're going to lose some of it," Cizick said.

Cizick said there was a lot of behind-the-scenes work to build support for the bill in the religious community.

He said there was concern early on that domestic debates would take away the international emphasis of the religious-persecution movement. Cizick said he feared early on that Gary Bauer, head of the Family Research Council and potential presidential candidate "was hijacking the religious-persecution movement to promote his views on China and trading status. That was not the goal of the movement."

Cizick applauded recent administration actions on religious persecution, including the establishment of a State Department advisory committee and special representative on the issue. "I think that a lot of conservatives need to acknowledge that the Clinton administration has done more to address the problem of religious persecution than the previous two administrations have done," he said.

Other religious groups that opposed parts of the original House bill, including the Baptist Joint Committee and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., applauded the Senate modifications.

James Dunn, executive director of the BJC, said the changes "constitute a victory for measured and realistic guidelines for foreign policy related to religious persecution."

"We can all rejoice in a fresh focus on human rights," Dunn said. "Since President Jimmy Carter's emphasis 20 years ago, the concept has not received adequate attention for the United States."

Many supporters of the bill credit Wolf with placing the issue on the congressional agenda.

During House debate, Wolf said victims of religious persecution would welcome the passage of the bill.

"Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns who are, at this moment, being tortured and beaten in Drapchi prison and the other Chinese-run prisons in Tibet, will find out what we do today," Wolf said. "In Iran, the families of the two Baha'i men sentenced to death last week and the 36 Baha'i faculty members arrested will know what we do today. In Pakistan, Ahmadi Muslims fearful of their lives will know what we do. And in China, the Muslims being persecuted in Xinjiang Province will hear the result of the vote in the House today."

"Passing this bill will help ensure that eliminating religious persecution becomes a prominent goal of our foreign policy and will help loosen the chains of government oppression endured by many today," Wolf said.

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