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**Seminary trustees request meeting  
to discuss president's leadership**

By Bob Allen

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Sixteen trustees of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary have requested a called meeting of the full board to discuss leadership of the seminary's president, Mark Coppenger, Associated Baptist Press has learned.

Coppenger, 51, who has been president of the Southern Baptist seminary in Kansas City, Mo., four years, earlier confessed "misappropriation of anger" at a called meeting of the trustee executive committee July 30. That meeting followed a two-month investigation by trustee leaders into complaints that Coppenger had misdirected his anger toward seminary employees.

At the July meeting, held in executive session, Coppenger confessed to having a problem with controlling his anger and agreed to specific recommendations by the executive committee for "steps to repentance and restoration," according to statements released after the meeting.

In a press conference after that meeting, trustee chairman Carl Weiser told reporters the full board would be briefed on the process, also in executive session, at the next scheduled trustee meeting in October.

Seminary bylaws, however, permit as few as 10 trustees to request a called meeting. Weiser, pastor of Hyland Heights Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., said Aug. 18 it appears there will be a called meeting of the full board. He said a previously scheduled meeting of the executive committee Aug. 26-27 had been cancelled in anticipation of a full board meeting.

Sixteen trustees reportedly signed a petition requesting a called meeting. The date for the meeting had not been determined by late Aug. 19.

The July 30 executive-committee meeting focused on anger, but trustees reportedly have also raised other concerns about Coppenger's leadership. An informed source told Associated Baptist Press that some trustees believe the president circumvented board policies on spending and reported inflated enrollment figures.

Coppenger criticized ABP's coverage of the July 30 meeting in a letter that appeared briefly on the seminary Web site, but reportedly was removed on advice of the chairman. Coppenger particularly objected to the article's use of unnamed sources.

An Aug. 3 news story in the Chronicle of Higher Education quoted Coppenger as saying he believed his behavior was being exaggerated by some who want to paint him as maniacal. "Unfortunately when you've done a lot of good things for the seminary, you accumulate enemies," he said in the Chronicle story. "I think that is what's at play here, the work of my enemies."

Concerning allegations that he used profanity, Coppenger said, "I didn't curse anybody out," and said the last time he remembers using a word as strong as "hell" was three years ago.

Coppenger was the only candidate interviewed by a presidential search committee that nominated him to the post in 1995. He is the 41-year-old school's third president, and the first elected since conservatives gained control of the board of trustees during the 1980s and early '90s.

At the time, the search committee cited Coppenger's conservative theology and his "vision and leadership" as qualities that won him the job.

Coppenger came to the post from Nashville, Tenn., where he was vice president for convention relations at the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee. Before that he was executive director of the State Convention of Baptists in Indiana and pastor of First Baptist Church in El Dorado, Ark.

Before earning his master-of-divinity degree at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the early 1980s, Coppenger had a Ph.D. in philosophy from Vanderbilt University and taught philosophy six years at Wheaton College.

Tracy Watson, who once worked for Coppenger on the staff of the church in Arkansas, defended his former pastor in an e-mail response to the ABP story posted on the news service's Web site. He speculated that "knowledgeable" unnamed sources cited by ABP "are simply disgruntled."

In a subsequent phone conversation, Watson, who now serves a church in Texas, described Coppenger as an "intelligent man" with a "high degree of integrity." He admitted that in his experience Coppenger holds strong convictions and is "very demanding" of both himself and others. Some people may be put off by his confrontational style, Watson said, advising that perhaps if Coppenger had been a pastor longer than five years before entering denominational work, more experience in a local church might have worn off some "rough edges" in his administrative style.

Others, however, said the ABP story essentially echoed their own experiences with the president.

One former student and employee at Midwestern Seminary said he saw Coppenger "throw things, kick things and holler."

"I saw it all the time," said the source, who asked not to be identified for fear of reprisal.

Another former student, who admitted he is a "moderate," said staff members are not the only ones to suffer from bouts of anger with Coppenger. "He hurt a lot of students, too, and I think continues to do so. I have no love loss for him whatsoever."

"I've seen a lot of friends of mine labeled the enemy," he said. "When they became the enemy, they had to be destroyed."

This source also asked not to be identified, not because he fears it would have negative repercussions against his ministry, but because, "I just don't want to have my name dragged around in the mud."

Both anonymous sources said that while Coppenger did not regularly use profanity, they and others both heard him on occasion use what one described as "choice words."

In his own defense, Coppenger said he was "perplexed" about allegations of profanity. "I can think of only one instance, three years ago, when in exasperation, I said to an employee, in supposedly private conversation, something like, 'What the hell am I supposed to do about this?' He reported it widely, and I was confronted with it. I repented of it, but the legend lives on by the best efforts of some," he wrote in his public statement.

Coppenger continued that as a long-time officer in the U.S. Army Reserve, "My ears are not as sensitive as those of some, so I'm sure I've said things on the order of 'damned if you do, and damned if you don't' and 'I made an ass of myself' without thinking much of it."

He said he would be happy to hear from "two or three witnesses" to an offense, which he said is the biblical standard for such allegations, to recount the specifics and the context. "And whatever, I'll redouble my efforts to be circumspect in my speech," he said.

Others who knew Coppenger as their pastor at First Baptist Church in El Dorado, Ark., from 1983 to 1988, differed in their assessment from Watson.

Rodney Landes and his wife, Helen, both said they saw Coppenger lose his temper and hit a free-standing blackboard with his fist in a meeting with parents who wanted to continue a tradition of recognizing high-school graduates during the Sunday morning service. Coppenger opposed it, because he believed it would detract from worship.

Van Evans, who is now retired, was minister of education and administration at the church when Coppenger came. He said he experienced Coppenger's anger "two or three times."

"My response was to say nothing and get up and go back to my office," he said. About 30 minutes later, he said Coppenger would approach him about another matter as if nothing had happened.

Evans, however, said he theorizes the outbursts may not have been as spontaneous as they seemed. He described Coppenger's anger as "a generated means of control and submission."

"This is how he gets his way," he said.

"I've really tried not to have any hard feelings about Mark -- to put him out of my mind" Evans said. "All of this has sort of brought back a lot of feelings."

Evans credited Coppenger with bringing "a new emphasis on evangelism and ... missions" to the church but said he left the congregation "fractured." He was a good preacher, Evans said, but was hampered by perceived "inconsistencies of his walk and talk."

Rodney Landes, who chaired the search committee that recommended Coppenger as pastor, said the church has moved on. "He moved within five years, and things have been a lot better ever since," he said.

After the July 30 executive-committee meeting, Coppenger said in a brief written statement he would pattern his program for reconciliation after a similar experience at the church in Arkansas.

"When I was a pastor, I offered, as part of our revival preparation, to visit folks whom I'd offended. I asked the congregation to supply me names. I went to a number of homes to try to make things right, and I'm persuaded that it helped pave the way for what proved to be a wonderful revival," Coppenger said.

Landes said he remembers Coppenger's visit to their home. He said the pastor "more or less asked for our forgiveness" in a general way.

"The thing that struck us is he finally admitted he had to do this before he could graduate from MasterLife," Landes said, adding that completion of the popular discipleship-training course was being used as a litmus test to hold any leadership position in the church. "That somehow affects the sincerity of it, as far as I'm concerned," Landes said.

Evans recalled that the revival, led by evangelist Kelly Green, focused on authentic baptism. Numerous church members came forward to be rebaptized, he said, but it did not reach a large number of unsaved people outside the church.

Landes agreed it was "a good revival," but "as far as it being a continuous thing and the church growing, that did not happen."

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## **Brent Walker nominated as BJC executive director**

By Larry Chesser

CHICAGO (ABP) -- A search committee voted unanimously Aug. 18 to nominate Brent Walker as the next executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee.

Walker, an attorney and ordained Baptist minister, is currently general counsel and associate executive director of the religious-liberty agency based in Washington. He is also an adjunct law professor at Georgetown University Law Center.

Subject to confirmation by the agency's directors at their Oct. 4-5 meeting, Walker will succeed James Dunn, who has directed the agency since January 1981.

Dunn is retiring from as executive director Sept. 1, when he will become president of the Baptist Joint Committee Foundation and professor of Christianity and public policy at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C.

Dunn is the agency's fourth chief executive, succeeding J.M. Dawson (1946-1953), Emanuel Carlson (1954-1971) and James Wood Jr. (1972-1980) in that role.

The 11-member search committee chose Walker after interviewing several candidates Aug. 17-18 in Chicago.

In a statement released Aug. 19, the committee said it was led to Walker "because of his enthusiasm for education and for igniting the flame of religious liberty in a new generation of Baptists and young people. He is deeply respected by legislators, is a proven church-state advocate and has a panoply of legal and pastoral abilities and talents."

The panel also noted that Walker, 48, is "well known and trusted by the diverse Baptist constituencies" that relate to the BJC.

Search committee chairman Aidsand Wright-Riggins III said the panel's task was to "identify a person who would carry our cause into the next millennium."

"In J. Brent Walker, we found a candidate young enough to continue the energetic and vigorous legacy of the Committee and old enough to lead it with wisdom and maturity," he said.

Wright-Riggins, executive director of National Ministries, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and chair of the Baptist Joint Committee, described Walker as a gifted spokesperson, preacher, lawyer and administrator.

"We were impressed that Brent's spiritual journey led him to leave a prestigious law practice, prepare for Christian ministry and then dedicate his skills as an ethicist and advocate for extending and defending religious freedom," Wright-Riggins said.

Walker said he is "humbled and honored to be nominated to succeed a legend -- the Baptist equivalent of a Vince Lombardi or a Bear Bryant."

"I look forward to building on James Dunn's agency-saving leadership and to guide the BJC in its mission of defending and extending religious freedom for all."

Walker earned a bachelor's degree in political science (1972) and a master's degree in public

administration (1973) from the University of Florida. After earning a juris doctor from Stetson University College of Law in 1976, he joined the Tampa law firm of Carlton, Fields, Ward, Emmanuel, Smith and Cutler. He became a partner in the firm in 1982.

Walker left the Tampa firm in 1986 to attend Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where he earned a master of divinity degree in 1989. While attending seminary, Walker served as pastor of Richland Baptist Church in Falmouth, Ky.

He speaks frequently on church-state issues at churches, conferences and on university and seminary campuses. He has lectured at American University, University of Maryland, Samford University, Furman University, Duke Divinity School, Southern Seminary, Wesley Theological Seminary and the Knight Center for Specialized Journalism.

Walker has appeared on numerous network news programs and is frequently quoted on church-state issues in major newspapers throughout the country.

He is married to Nancy Walker, minister to children at Columbia Baptist Church, Falls Church, Va. The Walkers have two children: Ryan, 20, a student at New York University, and Layton, 17, a student at George Mason High School, Falls Church, Va.

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## **IMB, CBF dispatch relief funds to Turkey**

ISTANBUL, Turkey (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist International Mission Board and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship both dispatched immediate monetary relief to help survivors of the earthquake that killed thousands in western Turkey Aug. 17.

"We're working on the immediate needs of food, water and medical supplies," said Southern Baptist Convention human-needs specialist Jim Brown. Brown said those needs would be diverted especially to areas being overlooked by other aid agencies.

An assessment team representing multiple agencies of the Southern Baptist Convention planned to leave for Turkey Aug. 21 to evaluate effective ways to contribute to the rescue effort.

A 10-member disaster-relief team from Texas Baptist Men planned to arrive in Turkey Aug. 23 to set up at one of the tent cities mushrooming to house survivors in devastated regions.

Two members of the Atlanta-based Cooperative Baptist Fellowship global-missions field team were in Turkey when the earthquake occurred. They cannot be named for their security and for the protection of people seeking information about Christianity. The couple reported that they were safe but asked for funds to purchase bread, water and medicine. They will help coordinate American relief efforts through a local U.S. embassy.

"In the providence of God, we already had veteran personnel in Turkey," said Gary Baldrige, interim global-missions coordinator. "They are moving quickly to meet needs with emergency funds."

CBF immediately sent \$5,000 from emergency relief funds, but additional funds are urgently needed, Baldrige said. News reports two days after the earthquake struck indicated at least 4,000 had died and another 10,000 people were missing.

Financial contributions are the fastest and most flexible way to meet immediate needs, said Ben Bryant, missions financial assistant for CBF. Other ways to help, such as volunteer rebuilding efforts and

clothing contributions, will continue to be assessed.

One visiting Southern Baptist group had just arrived in Istanbul when their hotel was damaged by the early-morning quake. Unhurt, they joined other Americans in the sprawling city when daylight came to distribute water, bread and other items in public parks to residents terrified to return to their apartments.

Pockets of Istanbul sustained major damage, but most of the death and destruction struck areas farther east -- like Izmit, the epicenter of the quake, about 55 miles away. A Southern Baptist who drove there from Istanbul Aug. 18 found many buildings flattened. "It was difficult to hear the cries for help from a man trapped inside a building when we knew that he probably wouldn't be rescued," he said.

Christians in Istanbul sent volunteers Aug. 19 to three of the hardest-hit towns. Another group was preparing food packets for distribution and working to obtain a truck to deliver desperately needed water the next day.

Said one Christian in Istanbul: "We've been trying to see what we can do, what people will let us do, what needs to be done. I keep thinking about that Bible passage where Mordecai tells Esther that maybe God put you here for such a time as this."

This is the second time in a year that CBF personnel have been involved in earthquake relief in Turkey. When an earthquake destroyed 200,000 homes in Adana, Turkey, last summer, CBF representative Frank Morrow went to Turkey with \$6,500 in Fellowship funds to buy food and medicine for earthquake victims. Morrow is based in Germany and works among an unreached people group.

The relief ministry caused two educators in the predominantly Islamic society to question Morrow about Christianity's influence on culture. He was able to give them New Testaments and explain that "Christians love because we were first loved."

When a disaster strikes, CBF's mission staff looks first to CBF personnel in the area to coordinate relief work. That allows the relief project to become an extension of their ministry, Bryant said.

If no CBF personnel are nearby, CBF's staff looks for ministry partners in the area, including organizations such as the Baptist World Alliance, Samaritan's Purse, and state and country Baptist organizations.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Contributions for earthquake relief at the International Mission Board may be sent to Southern Baptist World Relief at P.O. Box 6767, Richmond, Va., 23230. To make contributions to Cooperative Baptist Fellowship relief efforts, earmark checks for Turkey Earthquake Relief and mail to CBF, P.O. Box 101699, Atlanta, Ga., 30392.

## **Fellowship seeking volunteers for short-term work in Kosovo**

By Sarah Zimmerman

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is seeking volunteers to spend two weeks in Kosovo helping returned refugees prepare for winter.

Don and Helen McNeely, volunteer coordinators of the Atlanta-based CBF, and Tim Brendel, pastor of Ridge Baptist Church in Richmond, Va., traveled to Gjakova and Pristina, Kosovo, in late July to determine how volunteers might help.

"We saw widespread destruction and heard stories that were heartbreaking," said Don McNeely. The group traveled with missionaries, who served as interpreters.

Initial plans call for volunteers to work in Gjakova with Samaritan's Purse, the humanitarian organization led by Franklin Graham. In Pristina, volunteers will work with "Love in Action," a ministry organized by Albanian pastor Bikim Beka.

In both places, volunteers are needed for food distribution and warehouse coordination. Carpenters are also needed to help winterize homes and teach Kosovars how to roof their houses, Don McNeely said.

Cost will be \$1,840 per person, which includes airfare, insurance, housing and most meals.

CBF's missionaries working among Albanians, Arville and Shelia Earl, are based in Gostivar, Macedonia, near one of the refugee camps. Other members of CBF's Albanian missionary team, Rick and Martha Shaw and Darrel and Kathy Smith, are in the United States on home assignments.

In July, Daniel Vestal, CBF coordinator, visited the missionaries in Macedonia and toured a refugee camp of 5,000 people who for various reasons have not been able to return to Kosovo.

"At the dawn of the 21st century we still have ethnic cleansing and hatred that causes this kind of violence," Vestal reflected. "It was a very disturbing experience, yet very heartening to see how people do respond in Christian love."

"I was very impressed with the way our field personnel have established relationships," Vestal said. "This tragedy has caused great dislocation in Kosovo-Albanian people, but it has made them more open to acts of compassion and demonstrations of love which opens up the opportunity to share faith in Christ."

Vestal preached for a Christian church in Skopje, Macedonia. The congregation included Albanians, Macedonians, Gypsies and American expatriates. An Albanian man attending church for the first time later told Shaw he knew who Jesus was, but he had never heard anybody say Jesus loved him.

By mid-August, CBF's Albanian refugee relief fund had reached \$568,928. Funds have been used to purchase medicines for clinics in Macedonia, help U.S. churches which are sponsoring refugees and assist Baptist groups in Germany, Italy, Hungary and Croatia with Kosovar refugee-relief projects.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Note: Photos to accompany this story have been posted to the web site: [www.cbfonline.org/artfiles/](http://www.cbfonline.org/artfiles/). Use "access" as the name and "access99" as the password. Look in the folder labeled "Albanian refugee relief."

For information on how to volunteer to go to Kosovo, contact Marie Moore at (770) 220-1631 or [mmoore@cbfnet.org](mailto:mmoore@cbfnet.org). To contribute to the Fellowship's relief fund for Kosovo, send donations to CBF, P.O. Box 101699, Atlanta, GA 30392. Donations should be clearly marked for Albanian Refugee Relief.

## **Conservative Texas convention claims 209 'affiliated' churches**

DALLAS (ABP) -- In its first public report on membership, the Southern Baptist Convention of Texas said 209 churches have become affiliated with the new conservative state convention.

To "affiliate" with the SBCT, a church must take an official vote in a business meeting, financially support the convention and affirm agreement with its "foundational beliefs," according to its newsletter, the Plumline.

The alternative convention was organized last fall by founders who claimed the 6,000-church Baptist General Convention of Texas was unresponsive to conservative concerns.

All but 23 of 209 affiliated churches listed in the July newsletter have previously been listed in the BGCT annual. The group also claims to have received money from other churches that have not affiliated with SBCT.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Tennessee woman new president of Baptist Women in Ministry**

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (ABP) -- Raye Nell Dyer, an ordained Baptist minister who works as a chaplain at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tenn., is the new president of Baptist Women in Ministry.

Dyer was elected at the group's recent annual meeting in Birmingham, Ala. She succeeds Becca Gurney, a former associate pastor in Austin, Texas, who was president two years.

Members at the annual meeting also heard an update from a personnel committee that is developing a "paradigm" for hiring professional staff leadership for the 16-year-old organization.

Dyer said Baptist Women in Ministry, which organized in 1983 as a support network and resource clearinghouse for women ministers in Southern Baptist churches, has been moving toward paid leadership for several years.

The group is now putting together a "process team," which will meet with consultants, attend conferences and brainstorm about a new structure. "We are trying to create a non-hierarchical, egalitarian structure where all voices are heard, power is shared, decisions are made jointly, and tasks and responsibilities are done in partnership," Dyer said.

The process is scheduled for completion with the hiring of paid leadership Jan. 1, 2001, according to a news release.

Baptist Women in Ministry has about 400 members, said Pam May, resource administrator at the organization's offices in Kansas City, Kan. According to a 1998 study by Louisiana sociologist Sarah Frances Anders, there are at least 1,324 ordained Southern Baptist women, with just under 100 serving as pastors in local churches.

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-- By Bob Allen

## Novelist Anne Lamott shares faith, writing tips

By Carl White

CLINTON, Miss. (ABP) -- As a columnist who writes about spiritual themes in the secular magazine Salon, best-selling author Anne Lamott refers to herself as a "somewhat subversive Christian writer."

The great thing about writing for Salon is, "I get to write about God," Lamott said at a writer's conference at Mississippi College in July. "They said I could write about anything, so I write about God," said Lamott, a Californian who has published five novels and three best-selling non-fiction books.

"Subversive used to mean you wrote about communist stuff for normal people. I write about Christian stuff for leftist audiences. It is a huge, hungry, thirsty audience," she said.

Lamott was raised in an atheist family that disdained Christianity. By her own admission, there is not a left-wing issue her family failed to champion.

It was after having an abortion and drinking herself into a stupor for six straight days that she had an encounter with Christ that changed her life.

"I love Jesus, and I love my church," she told the audience of writers. "I am amazed that even someone like me could be loved by God."

Lamott said most members of her family are embarrassed by her Christianity, although one brother shares her faith. "The others refer to it as 'Annie's little blind spot,'" she said.

She said she is criticized both from the left and right. "I get a lot of hostile letters at Salon from people who don't like me writing about my faith," she said. "The Christian right is equally mad, sort of saying, 'Get her to stop.' In some of those circles I'm not seen as a real Christian."

"I may not be a very good Christian," she said. "I just love Jesus. I may not be near the dessert table in heaven, but I will be there."

Lamott's novels to date are "Hard Laughter," "Rosie," "Joe Jones," "All New People" and "Crooked Heart," the sequel to "Rosie."

"I am not an accomplished writer. I am a committed writer," she told both veteran and aspiring writers at the first of what is planned to become an annual conference at the Baptist-affiliated college in Clinton, Miss. The conference was sponsored jointly by the college and the Milton Center at Newman University in Wichita, Kansas. It was underwritten by a grant from the Hearin Foundation of Mississippi.

The conference's purpose is to give both aspiring and published writers a chance to hear from some of today's leading Christian writers, according to a press release.

Lamott said she is currently working on her sixth novel, but not because she is eager to write another. "Writing takes a lot of work," she said. "It makes you crazy."

She said she resisted starting another novel but came to the conclusion it was God's will for her.

"I tried to explain why I think [God] should have a different will for me," she said. "He laughed. Then I started getting my operating instructions."

"I was filled with terror and anxiety, but I have started," she said. "When you start getting information about God's will, things start snowballing. Creatively, things start to happen."

She related a story in Charles Allen's book "God's Psychiatry" of orphan children in Europe at the end of World War II who, because of hunger, could not sleep at night unless given a slice of bread to hold. It relieved their fear of not having anything to eat the next day.

As she works on her next novel, Lamott said God has given her "holding bread" to help her through.

One "slice" is understanding what good writing is about, she said. "Good writing is telling the truth -- about God, about God's children and taking care of God's children."

She warned aspiring authors not to write just in order to be published. "For some people, being published means the world has validated your parking ticket. But what happens to you once you get published? You will find there is no food for your soul in publication.

"I doesn't heal you. It doesn't teach you who you are or where you are. I should know. I've done it six times."

"Your motive for writing may be to look good, to be seen as smart or to make others smarter or more spiritually attuned," she said. "Ultimately, though, writing is about how you feel about you.

"The truth is, while publication doesn't have much to offer, writing really does."

She said another slice of holding bread is allowing herself to write "really bad first drafts."

"We are taught as children not to waste paper or waste time staring off into space, but good writing requires both of these," she said. "To write badly at first is an act of faith."

Lamott not only dispels the myth that good writers get it right the first time but also that good writers know beforehand where their story may lead.

"Writing is like driving a car at night with your headlights on," she said. "You can only see 20 feet in front of the car, but you can make it all the way."

"I tell writers to get a one-inch picture frame, then capture on paper what you can see through that one-inch frame. There is a voice that says that is not enough, but it is, for now."

"Another voice says you have to be in perfect shape before you start, but perfectionism is really the voice of the oppressor, the voice of the enemy," Lamott said.

"Grace meets you where you are, and it never leaves you where it found you," she said. "Grace is a come-as-you-are party."

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## **McFarland named first director of religious-freedom commission**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom has named Christian Legal Society attorney Steven McFarland as its first executive director.

McFarland has been director of the CLS' Center for Law and Religious Freedom for the past eight-and-one-half years. In that role, he has been a key leader of broad-based religious coalitions working on religious-freedom issues in the nation's capital.

The 10-member commission, established by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, is charged with advising the administration and Congress on ways to strengthen religious freedom and to combat religious persecution around the world. It works independently of both the executive and legislative branches of government.

In announcing the appointment Rabbi David Saperstein, chair of the commission, cited McFarland's "immense skills as a coalition builder, his tenacious ability to bring tasks to completion, his brilliant legal mind and the inordinate respect he is accorded by members of Congress and the administration with whom he has worked on a bipartisan basis."

Nine members of the commission were appointed by President Clinton and by Republican and Democratic congressional leaders. Robert Seiple, the United States' first ambassador for religious freedom, serves as the ex-officio 10th member.

McFarland, who will assume the new post Sept. 7., told Associated Baptist Press the panel has "great strength in its commissioners, but the proof of the pudding will be in whether religious Americans wake up to the reality of persecution abroad and wake up soon."

He said the commission would provide "objective reports" and "honest evaluations of policy" dealing with global religious-liberty issues, but it will be up to individuals to determine whether that information merits a call to lawmakers.

At CLS, McFarland helped lead the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion in pursuit of legislation designed to bolster protections for religious practice in the United States. The coalition, comprising more than 80 members, worked to pass the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 and is now seeking Senate passage of the Religious Liberty Protection Act.

CLS has named University of Missouri constitutional law professor Carl Esbeck to succeed McFarland as head of the Center for Law and Religious Freedom.

In a statement released by CLS, Esbeck said he would continue the society's "constructive role" in the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion.

Esbeck said he is "also looking forward to working with the growing, bipartisan group of Americans who, without unconstitutionally preferring one religion over another, are working to enhance the 'charitable choices' of the poor and the disabled to receive social services from faith-based providers, not just government agencies."

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