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Preacher urges CBF to seize the 'now'

By Lacy Elwood

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- A featured speaker at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's June 27-29 General Assembly urged the 11-year-old organization to seize the "now" to love Christ and spread his love.

"I can't love him yesterday; yesterday's already a vapor," Julie Pennington-Russell, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco, Texas, said during an opening worship service at the meeting. "I can't love him tomorrow. I can plan to love him tomorrow, but there's no guarantee I'm going to be around even later tonight. Now is starting to make a lot of sense."

The theme for this year's annual gathering, held in Fort Worth, Texas, was "It's Time!" Pennington-Russell paraphrased the idea with the Latin phrase "carpe diem," translated "seize the day."

"Now is all any of us has," she said, noting that "the now we're living in seems to be changing exponentially." People are seeking but skeptical, she said, and always looking for more, as illustrated in the mantra from popular music, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

Living in an age different from "the now our grandparents, parents or even our older sister knew," Pennington-Russell said people shouldn't question whether they like the "now" they've been given, but rather what they will do with it.

"What will CBF do with this now?" Pennington-Russell asked. "There are a lot of answers to that question, but when we've cooked all those answers down to the essence, one thing remains, a face. The face of absolute, unambiguous, undiluted love. If we're wise, we'll fix our eyes on that face, the face of Jesus."

"Jesus knew something about living in the now," Pennington-Russell said. "If anyone ever carped every diem, it was Jesus."

"He had the most amazing ability to see past all the secondary concerns and see clearly what matters in this world," she said

Pennington-Russell said CBF could learn from Christ's example by looking past questions about the organization's future.

"It is astonishing the mountains of time and energy that is spent chewing on the questions, 'Is CBF going to make it? Is CBF going to survive? Are we making all the right friends and dodging all the right enemies?' she said. "Those questions are too small a concern for us."

Urging members to "immerse ourselves in the person and purpose of Jesus Christ," Pennington-

Russell said the CBF could become a movement in Christian history, similar to the youth-revival movement started by college students in the 1940s.

"All they had was a deep love for Jesus. All they had was now and they seized it," Pennington-Russell said. "As one person said, 'We were riding the wind of God.' Sisters and brothers, the same wind is blowing and if we're wise and if we're brave, we'll grab hold of this spirit as it rushes by and hold on for dear life."

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Past CBF leader says it's time to consider new convention

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Moderates moving away from the Southern Baptist Convention will sooner or later become a new convention and should begin thinking about what form it will take, Cecil Sherman told a gathering of Mainstream Baptists June 27.

Sherman, former coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, was keynote speaker at a banquet in Fort Worth, Texas, sponsored by the Mainstream Baptist Network. The banquet was held in conjunction with the CBF General Assembly, although Mainstream is not directly affiliated with CBF.

"There is an opening for our kind of people, . a window of opportunity," Sherman said.

The CBF's current coordinator, Daniel Vestal, however, disagreed with his predecessor. Asked in a breakout session if he believed a new convention is around the corner, Vestal said, "It ain't gonna happen."

"You don't just form a convention by announcing it," Vestal said. "I don't think churches are going to join a new convention."

Sherman compared the condition of moderate Baptists to the children of Israel leaving bondage in Egypt. "We are out of Egypt, but we are not in the Promised Land," he said.

Moderate Baptists formed the CBF in 1991 over differences with conservatives that gained control of the SBC in the 1980s and '90s. The new organization's leadership has insisted, however, that the group is a fellowship, and not a precursor to a denomination.

The CBF rejected a motion to form a new convention in 1995. Leaders said at the time there wasn't enough interest in formally separating from the SBC, and that taking the step would be divisive in local churches. After a study of the question, however, the CBF did vote to start appointing chaplains, a function normally done by denominational bodies, in 1997.

Meanwhile, other groupings of moderate Baptists have grown up alongside the CBF over the years, including the Mainstream Baptist Network, the Alliance of Baptists and other state-focused groups.

Sherman called the current landscape of moderate Baptist affinities "an ill-formed cluster of clusters."

He discounted the much-talked-about notion of post-denominationalism, arguing that denominations may change but will not go away. "Denominations are going to stay alive," he predicted.

To reinforce the point, he quoted a former Southern Baptist pastor who started a new church without the support of a denomination: "People who wonder about the future of denominations should try living without one."

Despite protestations to the contrary, moderate Baptists will end up with a convention or denomination, Sherman insisted. "We have been building a new denomination for 10 years."

This is not a clear-cut process, however, he added. "Getting out of Egypt doesn't solve all problems."

Among challenges he listed were "negative self-definitions," odd personalities and the obsession of some with going back to Egypt.

"We've got to get beyond negative self-definitions," he said. "What we are against will get us out of Egypt but not much farther."

Further, Sherman admitted, "Some of the people who came out of Egypt with us are nuts. They are fruitcakes."

Because a journey through the wilderness may not always be pleasant, "fainthearted people look back," he said. "The bigness of Egypt calls them."

For moderate Baptists to move beyond the wilderness into a Promised Land will require serious thought and intentional action by people younger than Sherman, who is 68.

"Folks like me don't have a lot of business at the table," he said. "We've had our turn."

The four people most likely to guide this process, he said, are Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas; John Upton, executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia; David Currie, executive director of Texas Baptists Committed; and Vestal.

Sherman said some sort of cohesive convention structure is possible, because although moderate Baptists are not all alike, "We're more alike than we'd like to admit."

But he said that cohesion will be limited, unless the fringes see the value of promoting the center.

Sherman warned against "elitist groups" that "characterize themselves but not us." Such groups, he said, are "not very smart" in advancing the Baptist cause.

"Baptists are conservative people," he said. "If we don't present ourselves in ways that make us sound like we're like them, they're not going to join us." Sherman urged moderate Baptists to "make your case from the text," the Bible. "You can be for causes if they are truly biblical causes," he said.

Sherman recalled discussions in the early 1990s about merging the CBF with the Alliance of Baptists. In an initial meeting, an Alliance representative insisted that for a merger to work, "Every church in CBF should hold our position on the women's issue," Sherman said.

"Then we'll never merge," Sherman responded.

He said he sees no difference between that type of demand and the SBC leadership's demand for conformity on biblical inerrancy.

That's not to say some issues aren't essential, Sherman continued. "Some ideas are very important."

The one vital issue, he said, is "who is Jesus?"

"Christianity is about Jesus," he said. "It's looking at God through Jesus. That's the big idea. . All the rest, I can talk to you, work with you."

Unless moderates make that message clear, they will not gain the trust of many Baptists, Sherman said. "A lot of people don't like the actions of the SBC, but they're not sure they want to join us."

He recalled a comment made several years ago by someone in a church where he visited representing CBF: "I don't like them (SBC), but I don't trust you (CBF)."

Though Sherman opposed the CBF forming a new convention when he led the organization in 1995, he said at the time he believed it was a question of timing. "I would be surprised if this group votes to do that next year, but I'd be a lot surprised if this group hasn't done that within 20 years," he told a reporter.

Vestal, in his breakout session at this year's General Assembly, said CBF's emphasis on partnerships with ministry groups that share common values is more appealing to contemporary church leaders than a centralized denominational body.

He predicted that currently existing denominations would in the future come to resemble CBF's "denomination-like" approach. Because of that, he said that the CBF is uniquely poised to serve churches in a era termed by many as "post-denominational."

CBF elects woman as moderator-elect

By Bob Allen

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship elected a Missouri lay woman as moderator-elect at the organization's annual General Assembly June 27-29 in Fort Worth, Texas.

Cynthia Holmes of Clayton, Mo., is a St. Louis-area attorney and a member of Overland Baptist Church. She has served several years on the CBF's Coordinating Council, currently as an at-large member and chairperson of the council's legal committee.

Holmes will serve next year as moderator-elect before becoming the Fellowship's top elected leader in 2003-2004. Phill Martin of Richardson, Texas, elected last year as moderator-elect, takes over as moderator this year from Virginia pastor Jim Baucom.

Holmes will be the sixth woman to assume leadership in the CBF since it organized in 1991. The 1,800-church Fellowship formed out of a split with the 16 million-member Southern Baptist Convention, which in recent years has sparked controversy with stances against the ordination of women in Baptist churches and that wives should submit to their husbands in the home.

At a pre-General Assembly meeting of the Coordinating Council, the CBF's top paid administrator said he believes his organization provides a good model for churches in including people of both sexes in leadership roles.

"We are a laboratory of shared leadership between men and women," CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal said. "It's in our DNA to have leadership that is shared by men and women."

"We don't have to argue about that," Vestal said. "It is in us. I don't mean to say we're perfect there, but I really do believe we have as one of our core values . a commitment to leadership that is shared by male and female."

During the General Assembly, Vestal said his vision for CBF is the same as his vision for the church, to represent Christ in the world.

"The mission given by God to every Christian and every church is to be an embodiment of Christ, an extension of Christ," Vestal said. "We are to be what Christ was while he was on this earth.

"We are to be Christ in the world, the body of Christ, the mystical presence of Christ, the representative of Christ. Our mission is to live as Christ, to act as Christ and, if necessary, to suffer as Christ."

Vestal said the future of CBF lies in serving and equipping "incarnational" churches. Such churches, he said, will be both "prophetic" in their message and "priestly" in service to others.

"The church that incarnates the life and ministry of Jesus will love sinners," Vestal said. "Because it loves sinners, it will serve them."

Rather than casting stones at non-Christians, Vestal said such churches "will make sinners feel welcome because they are welcome."

But turning to relationships within the church, Vestal asked, "How can we love sinners outside the church if we don't love sinners inside the church, that is if we don't love one another?"

"Moderate Baptists are critical of one another," Vestal said. "Cynical and caustic, instead of compassionate and kind. If I were asked to name the single one ingredient of what characterizes the incarnational church, it would be this one: it serves. And because it loves it will be both prophetic and priestly."

Baucom, pastor of Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., gave both an introduction and response to Vestal's message.

Baucom said he believes Cooperative Baptist churches "are among the true heirs" of the church's mission of incarnating Christ's spirit.

"I submit to you that CBF is Christ's body fulfilled for the 21st century," he said. "We are the Baptist incarnation of God's love in our world today. That is what defines us. That is what tells us who we are."

Baucom completed his one-year term as CBF moderator, a non-paid leadership position, at the close of the General Assembly. He stays another year on the Coordinating Council and leadership team in his capacity as past-moderator.

Martin, a clergyman who directs the National Association of Church Business Administrators, will preside over next year's General Assembly, as well as at meetings of the Coordinating Council during the next year.

Paul Kenley, pastor of First Baptist Church of Lampasas, Texas, was elected to a third term as recorder.

In a business session, CBF registrants approved a \$19.2 million budget for 2002-2003. Fifty-eight percent of that amount, \$11.2 million, is earmarked for global missions. The budget anticipates \$10.1 million in undesignated gifts and a \$6.1 million goal for the CBF's global-missions offering. Other expenditures include \$1.2 million in institutional support for 11 theology schools and partial support for several other "partner" organizations, including the Baptist Joint Committee, Associated Baptist Press, Baptists Today, the Baptist Center for Ethics, the Center for Christian Ethics and Passport, a youth camping ministry.

About \$7 million in the budget supports CBF strategic initiatives -- broad program categories of faith formation, building community and networking and leadership development -- plus communications and marketing, General Assembly expenses and administration.

Prior to the General Assembly, the Coordinating Council filled two key positions for the CBF's Resource Center staff in Atlanta. North Carolina educator Bruce "Bo" Prosser becomes coordinator for congregational life. Priority areas for the job include evangelism and outreach, spiritual growth, congregational health, marriage and family, interfaith and ecumenical dialogue and reconciliation and justice.

Veteran Baptist communicator Ben McDade becomes director for communications and marketing. He succeeds David Wilkinson, a long-time CBF employee who recently resigned.

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