

# **CBF not a denomination but becoming more like one, Vestal tells council\_110303**

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**By Greg Warner**

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ATLANTA (ABP)-The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is not really a denomination, says CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal, but it is becoming more like a denomination and indeed functions as one for some churches.

The question of what CBF will become has been a constant topic of speculation and some controversy since the organization was formed by moderate Southern Baptists in 1991. Vestal told members of the group's Coordinating Council CBF has undergone a "progression in the development of our identity." And while no final answer has emerged, some consensus is developing around the CBF's mission, he said.

Vestal spoke during the council's fall meeting in Atlanta, during which the group adopted a budget goal of \$16 million for 2004-05, began a study of funding for "partner" ministries such as seminaries, and agreed to re-evaluate the vacant position of resource center coordinator, the organization's chief operating officer.

The CBF most often describes itself as a “network of churches and individuals.” When it was founded, Vestal said, CBF served as “a relief and rescue operation” for moderate Baptists and their causes.

But it soon became a movement centered on Baptist principles, he said, and in 1993 it became a “missionary sending and supporting organization.”

“In the last three to five years,” he continued, “we have become something of a denomination-like organization for some people.”

“We have about 150 to 175 churches ... that do not have any kind of relationship to the Southern Baptist Convention,” Vestal said. For those churches that relate to CBF and no other Baptist body, CBF serves in the role of a denomination or convention, he said.

“When I get past that, however, I get real squishy about numbers,” he added.

About 5,000 churches have contributed funds to and through the CBF since its inception, including about 2,000 that did so last year, Vestal said. But those churches identify with the CBF in various ways and for various reasons, so those relationships become difficult to classify, he said.

“Our emphasis has been not so much on membership as on partnership,” he explained.

While the CBF is taking on more traits of a denomination or convention, Vestal said, “we are not a denominational magisterium, we are not a denominational headquarters, and God knows we are not a denominational authority” for churches.

Instead, Vestal said, CBF is becoming more defined by its vision and mission.

“We are gaining something of a consensus around our vision. We want to

be the presence of Christ. We want to incarnate the presence of Christ in the world. Our mission is to serve Christians and churches as they discover and fulfill their God-given mission. And the goal of that mission in every context is to become the presence of Christ.”

Some people use terms like denomination, convention and mission-sending organization to describe CBF, Vestal acknowledged, “but the word 'fellowship' captures us more than any other word because it describes relationships and partnership.”

The Coordinating Council heard about new or expanding partnerships with several other Baptist bodies. In July, CBF was granted membership in the Baptist World Alliance, an international network of Baptist conventions and bodies.

“We can't fully grasp the significance of what that is going to mean for us and for Baptists and for the Baptist witness around the world,” Vestal said. Already the CBF is well known and respected by BWA members, Vestal said, adding, “Our missionaries are held in high esteem around the world.”

Additionally, the CBF is collaborating with the American Baptist Churches in the USA, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the Baptist General Association of Virginia, the Hispanic Baptist Convention of Texas, the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, the District of Columbia Baptist Convention and Canadian Baptist groups, among others.

Philip Wise, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Lubbock and chair of the Coordinating Council's finance committee, reported that through the first three months of this fiscal year, which began in July, revenues are keeping pace with the budget. That is an improvement over last fiscal year, when the CBF had to reduce its budget.

The council adopted a “not-to-exceed” figure of \$16,008,000 for the 2004-05 annual budget, the same as the reduced budget for 2003-04.

Specifics of the budget will be drafted by the CBF staff and presented to the council later in the year.

The study of partner funding was prompted in part by budget constraints that forced CBF last year to cut funding for its partners, which include 13 theological schools, the Baptist Joint Committee, Associated Baptist Press, Baptists Today, the Baptist Center for Ethics and others.

The study committee's assignment included a suggestion to reduce CBF funding of partners by another 30 percent. Vestal said he is aware of "a lot of anxiety among our partners" over the study.

The partner study committee met for the first time during the council meeting. Chair Charles Cantrell of Mountain View, Mo., reported the group began by defining the questions the committee needs to address and setting the parameters for the committee.

"My hope is that this process can be about far more than money," Vestal said. "I want it to be a celebration of our partners."

The personnel committee announced it is evaluating the scope of the resource center coordinator position, which became vacant in August when Reba Cobb resigned to accept another position. A search committee was named.

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