

Vestal tells Coordinating Council it's time for CBF to 'step up' and be good BWA member_71204

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Vestal tells Coordinating Council it's time for CBF to 'step up' and be good BWA member

By John Pierce & Greg Warner

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP)-Daniel Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, said the Baptist World Alliance "is going to find a new vision and new life" in the next few months and years, even though it recently lost its largest member and donor.

Speaking to the CBF Coordinating Council for the first time since February, Vestal urged the Fellowship and its members to support BWA, a worldwide network of 210 Baptist bodies.

"It's time for us to step up and step out and say we are good members" of BWA, Vestal said.

Ross
Shelton
(left) of
First
Baptist
Church of
Castroville,
who just
accepted
his first
pastorate,
talks with
Valerie
Hardy and
Gary Skeen
of the
Church
Benefits
Board
about their
services
during the
Resource
Fair at the
Cooperative
Baptist
Fellowship
general
assembly.

The Southern Baptist Convention, which helped form the Baptist World Alliance 99 years ago, voted June 15 to withdraw its membership and funding from BWA over allegations of theological liberalism. The international organization denies those charges, saying the major factor in the SBC's departure was BWA's decision last year to accept the Fellowship as a member.

BWA will celebrate its centennial next year in Birmingham, England. "I think it is very important for CBFers to go," Vestal said of the 2005 meeting.

Vestal also told of his 10-day tour of four African nations earlier this year that convinced him of the need for greater CBF mission involvement, particularly in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis there.

"HIV/AIDS is a moral problem, a medical problem, a social problem and a political problem—and it is our problem," Vestal told council members.

The Coordinating Council heard about a new partnership between CBF and Call to Renewal, an anti-poverty advocacy group comprised largely of Christian evangelicals.

The Fellowship already fights poverty on a practical, local level through Partners in Hope, the Fellowship's rural poverty initiative, Vestal said. The anti-poverty partnership with Call to Renewal allows CBF "to make our voice heard in the public-policy arena," Vestal said.

Yonce Shelton, national coordinator and policy director for the Washington-based group fielded questions from council members. "Poverty is the one issue with a biblical imperative that churches can agree on," he told the council.

"This represents a step for us," Vestal said of the new partnership, "and this body needs to get comfortable or uncomfortable with this."

One council member said she was uncomfortable with Call to Renewal's support for President Bush's faith-based initiatives, which channel government money to religious social-ministry groups, including churches. Critics say the initiatives constitute government support or establishment of religion.

Shelton said Call to Renewal supported faith-based initiatives at the outset in order to take a positive approach and because they were supposed to be matched by public-policy changes and funding.

"We supported faith-based initiatives with the understanding ... you can't just rely on churches," he said. "You have to have the commitment to programs as well."

Call to Renewal "took a lot of heat for that," he added. The "rhetoric" from the Bush administration always was good on faith-based initiatives, but without the policy changes on poverty to back it up, Call to Renewal decided last year "we don't think we can support" the program, Shelton said. "We see it as crumbs from the table to churches that are already overworked."

The council heard a report from CBF's Partnership Study Committee, which is examining the organization's funding of and relationships with other like-minded Baptist ministries and institutions. Committee Chair Charles Cantrell of Mountain Home, Mo., said the group will have its report ready before the council's October meeting.

Barbara Baldrige, co-coordinator for global missions, introduced new field personnel to the council. Two anonymous gifts totaling nearly \$7 million, which were reported earlier, were credited with the expansion of CBF missionaries and mission projects.

Baldrige said CBF has 143 career missionaries on the field in addition to short-term workers and others holding secular employment.

Baldrige said morale remains high among field personnel despite continuing uncertainties throughout the world. "The level of difficulty varies greatly ... ," she said. "We keep a close tab on the situation around the world. Most of our field personnel say, 'I'm staying right here no matter what.' Still, we keep in touch with them and keep their safety and best interest in mind."

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.