

# CBF at 25

Stories of the  
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

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For Free and Faithful Baptists on the  
25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of CBF

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# PREFACE

## Story of a Name

*By Aaron D. Weaver*

When Page Fulgham stepped up to the microphone during the last session of the Consultation of Concerned Baptists in Atlanta on August 25, 1990, he knew the group of some 3,000 moderate Baptists needed a name. The theme of the three-day gathering was “For Such A Time As This,” and Fulgham, like so many others, felt the gravity of the moment—“a feeling of euphoria in the sense that we had finally come home,” as he would describe it to me 25 years later.

For such a time as this, the pastor of nearby First Baptist Church of Lawrenceville, Georgia, leaned in to the microphone and made a last-minute motion to name the new group the “Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.”

Jimmy Allen, presiding convener of the Consultation, quickly responded and urged Fulgham and the attendees to refer to the new group as simply “the fellowship” for the time being. “If you name it, you might lose it,” Allen warned, alluding to the *other home* that the room of concerned Baptists had helped build and sustain, only to later lose to fundamentalism.

Persuaded by Allen, a past president of that *other home*, Fulgham returned to the microphone and rescinded his motion. A formal name would have to wait for another time.

“We were Baptists who were cooperating together for a mission, a cause, a purpose and, unlike our former associations, we felt a great sense of togetherness,” Fulgham explained to me, noting that the name carried with it the tradition of the Cooperative Program of the Southern Baptist Convention, the single giving plan that had united Southern Baptists for decades.

“The name, I think, was good, so I made the motion. It just kind of came to me in the moment, sort of a moment of inspiration.”

Over the next year, the journey to adopt the name Cooperative Baptist Fellowship took a tortuous path. Five months later, the Interim Steering Committee of “the fellowship” agreed to recommend the name “The Baptist Fellowship” to the upcoming Convocation scheduled for May 9-11, 1991, at the Omni Coliseum in Atlanta.

That proposal was short-lived, as the committee soon discovered that another group of Baptists had already registered the name with the Georgia Secretary of State—ironically, an independent Baptist group with past ties to the fiery fundamentalist preacher (and former Southern Baptist) J. Frank Norris.

Discussion of what to formally call “the fellowship” came up again a few months later at the Interim Steering Committee’s May 8-9 meeting immediately preceding the founding Convocation. At the meeting, committee members learned that lawyers for “the fellowship” had reserved several potential names, including “Fellowship of Baptists Inc.” and “Baptist Congress.”

During the meeting, one member recommended the name “Fellowship of Cooperating Baptists” to be listed on the group’s proposed constitution. Another member asked if “cooperating” could be changed to “cooperative”—and one high-profile member said “cooperative” had become “a chain at my church.”

“If we’re going to break free, I’d like us to try some new language,” the member said.

Another well-known voice spoke up and expressed his unease with both “cooperating” and “fellowship”: “I no longer like the term ‘fellowship,’ and we are not at this point ‘cooperating.’”

More names were suggested, such as “The Association of Baptists,” “Baptist Assembly,” “Baptist Cooperative Missions Association” and “Free Baptists.” With no agreed-upon name looming on the horizon, a five-member subcommittee was appointed to take a few hours and return with a list of three names for the committee to choose from.

Later in the evening, three names were recommended: “United Baptist Fellowship,” “Fellowship of Baptists United” and “Baptists United.” With all five members in agreement, the subcommittee moved that the group adopt the name “United Baptist Fellowship.”

They did and did so unanimously. But the story doesn’t end there.

Less than 48 hours later, Daniel Vestal stood behind the podium as Moderator of the founding Convocation, alongside lay leader (and fellow Texan) Patricia Ayres, and introduced to attendees the proposed Constitution and Bylaws bearing the name “United Baptist Fellowship.”

As Vestal prepared the group to discuss Article 1 of the Constitution, attendees lined up at microphones spread out across the room to weigh in on the proposed new name. John Dunaway, pastor of First Baptist Church in Corbin, Kentucky, was first up.

“What United Baptist means in our area of the country,” Dunaway told the crowd, “is an extreme Calvinistic view, a view of Baptists there who are considerably different . . . whose concept of education is different from ours, whose concept of the ministry is different from ours, whose concept of mission is different from ours, whose concept of evangelism is different from ours.

“To identify, in my mind, with a group called ‘United Baptists’, whether it’s simply with the term ‘fellowship’ added to it, would be in contradiction to what we ourselves have said we are, who we are and what our purpose is,” Dunaway continued. “It would appear to me something to the term of ‘Cooperative Baptists’ would include far more than this and would make possible an easier relationship for all Baptists who choose to cooperate on the basis of missions, evangelism, education and ministry.

“I move that the words ‘United Baptist’ be amended to ‘Cooperative Baptist’ throughout the document,” Dunaway said.

After an explanation from a member of the Interim Steering Committee on how they came up with the name “United Baptist Fellowship,” Ed Vick, a layman from Raleigh, North Carolina, was recognized to address the assembly.

“In our group, we have discussed the name and feel that the word ‘united’ breeds two problems. One, the first image that comes to your mind is our good friends the Methodists. And second, I don’t believe Baptists in the truest sense of the word are united. We are cooperative, but we’re not united,” said Vick, receiving applause and chuckles from the crowd.

Next up was Mike Queen, pastor of First Baptist Church in Wilmington, North Carolina, who joined Dunaway, pointing to the potential confusion the name “United Baptists” would bring in certain parts of the country.

“When I left my home in West Virginia to go to Southeastern Seminary, the United Baptists that are part of the Queen family all prayed for me . . . but what they prayed for was that I wouldn’t learn anything when I went to seminary,” Queen said to loud laughter. “I have disappointed them, I think. What the brother from Kentucky said is true—in that part of the country, United Baptists mean something so radically different from who and what we are.”

The debate over the name would continue as two more individuals weighed in, one speaking in favor of Dunaway’s motion and another

suggesting the need to move away from the term “cooperative” and its connection to the past.

Then Dunaway returned to the microphone to speak to his motion.

“The word cooperative . . . is not a bad term. But it is the idea that we are a cooperating body . . . and this places the emphasis on freedom, of voluntarily committing ourselves to work together.”

After Dunaway was done, Vestal exclaimed: “Isn’t it great to be in a meeting where you can talk?”

The crowd began clapping, and a moment later the assembly adopted the name “Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.”

“And the motion does carry. You have voted yourself a name,” Vestal announced as the clapping continued.

This *story of a name* is just one of the stories of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship over the past 25 years. The stories in this anniversary volume reflect our shared heritage and hope through the stories of individuals, congregations, pastors and professors, lay leaders, young Baptists, field personnel and short-term missionaries, chaplains and pastoral counselors, partners and friends. They are the stories of being the presence of Christ and forming together in Christ.

When newly elected CBF Moderator John Hewett stood behind the podium at the Omni Coliseum in 1991 to offer parting words to the three-day gathering, he gave voice to the Convocation’s theme—“Behold, I am doing a new thing!” He spoke of the pilgrimage that they as Baptists were on together: a journey to their new spiritual *home*.

“I am no longer worried about the future,” Hewett said. “I’m convinced we are heading someplace free and faithful.”

As we look forward to the next 25 years as Cooperative Baptists, may we remember the journey while also continuing to do bold new things together as a Fellowship. Happy 25th Anniversary!

*Aaron D. Weaver is Communications Manager for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, where he serves as editor of fellowship! magazine.*

## FOREWORD

# Heritage and Hope

*By Daniel Vestal*

Since the birth of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship 25 years ago, the world has changed. I often tell friends that we have lived through a period of societal, cultural and denominational deconstruction and reconstruction in the past quarter century. For thoughtful Christians who want to be true to scripture and authentic in ministry, it has not been easy. It still is not easy. Personal discipleship, congregational formation and public witness remain daunting challenges for Baptists.

The Church in North America finds itself in a secular and sometimes hostile environment. Partisan rhetoric fuels division among us. “The color line” still divides large portions of our society, and 11 o’clock on Sunday morning is still the most segregated hour of the week. These also are daunting challenges for Baptists.

Yet the gospel is as true today as ever. God is on a mission of reconciliation. The Spirit is at work within the Church as well as outside it. The Kingdom has come, is coming and will come. Jesus Christ is Lord. We need not be afraid. There are hopeful signs in the midst of the challenges. Millions of people are coming to Christ in the Global South, and the Global Church is growing. Even in our country, there is an awakening to spirituality which provides all kinds of opportunities for witness. Younger people do care about issues of justice, and they offer visionary and passionate leadership.

The past 25 years, though a significant amount of time in the life of one person, is but a “blip” on the timeline of history. While it is difficult to evaluate what is of lasting importance and what should be forgotten, let me offer a few personal reflections on my experience in CBF.

First, *the joy is in the journey*. In our beginning, there was a sense of wonder at what was happening among us and through us. Many of us realized early that we were participating in the creation of something much bigger than ourselves and that we were not the primary architects. Nobody recognized this more than Cecil Sherman, the first Executive Coordinator of CBF. He was a discerning and perceptive leader.

Along with Walter B. Shurden, Cecil prepared a document, “An Address to the Public,” that was approved by the Interim Steering

Committee of the new movement and then presented to the CBF founding Convocation in 1991. The strong sentiment in the room when the committee received and read this profound statement was great joy. In spite of uncertainty and anguish, there was joy. We adopted it unanimously without changing a word.

Our joy in CBF has not usually been one of giddiness. Rather, it's been expressed in a more subdued manner. But our joy has been real and, at times, euphoric. Some of the greatest worship experiences I have known were at CBF General Assemblies where I wept and laughed simultaneously from sheer joy. Some of my richest spiritual experiences were in CBF prayer retreats and leadership conferences. Even when participating in disaster relief in Southeast Asia (2004), New Orleans (2005) and Haiti (2010), those who were involved exhibited a joyful gratitude in the midst of very difficult work.

A second reflection is that *we are laborers together with God*. I would be remiss if I did not bear witness to what I have seen of providence in the sacrificial service of CBF field personnel. JoAnn and John David Hopper, one of the first missionary couples to be commissioned, had a ministry in Eastern Europe that was legendary even before they retired. More than 325 CBF field personnel appointments have followed in the past 25 years. These missionaries have served in some of the most difficult and dangerous places in the world, and they continue to inspire us to greater sacrifice.

The word “partnership” has defined CBF’s mission initiatives from the very beginning. The idea behind such a strategy is the presupposition that we can do more together than we can alone. Hence we have had influence in the world mission enterprise far beyond our size and dollars. The list of mission partners is long and illustrious: World Vision, Baptist World Alliance, Buckner International, Habitat for Humanity, Bread for the World, Volunteers of America, American Baptists, Passport, Wycliffe, American Bible Society and thousands of churches and hundreds of nonprofit organizations that encircle the globe.

Partnerships have also defined our “labors together” in spiritual and congregational formation as well as in leadership development. But it has been in theological education where the Fellowship’s partnering with new seminaries has been transformative. These schools, which function independently of one another but form a consortium with one another, have changed the face of Baptist life. Their influence and impact are truly remarkable.

Conversations—serious conversations—have also defined our “labors together.” These Fellowship-wide conversations have been intentional, giving us clarity and conviction about our identity and mission. The topics have included strategic visioning (1998), the missional church (2000), rural poverty (2001), HIV/AIDS (2006), the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and global poverty (2009), human sexuality (2012), organizational structure (2010-2012) and advocacy for social justice (2013-2016). They have required us to listen to one another and to the Spirit in ways that have formed and transformed our understandings of ourselves, the world and the gospel. This, too, has been the work of the Lord.

A final reflection is that *there’s a sweet, sweet spirit in this place* called CBF. If asked to define my most rewarding memory of the past 25 years, I must say that it has been the personal relationships that have been birthed and nurtured during these years. My life has been changed because of the friendships that would not have happened if it were not for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Clergy and laity, male and female, young and old make for a rich tapestry that is then made even richer by geographical, cultural and theological differences.

We are a work of God’s grace and a renewal movement within the Baptist family. One reason I believe this so strongly is because we have stayed focused on our oneness in Christ even though we have great diversity. Our commitment as Baptists to soul freedom, Bible freedom, church freedom and religious freedom has allowed us to disagree with one another, sometimes strongly, and yet to share ministry and life together in mutual affection.

I have seen and experienced this affection from our very beginning, and I see and experience it still. We are surely not perfect and will no doubt face more “growing pains” in the next 25 years. But the Christian witness in America needs the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. The Global Church needs the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Local churches need the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

So with deep gratitude for the past and great hope for the future, I join my voice with the voices of friends and colleagues who offer the following reflections and stories in a chorus of doxology. Praise be to God for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

*Daniel Vestal served as Executive Coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship from 1996 until 2012.*