

Nashville, Tennessee

Editor: Greg Warner  
Associate Editor: Bob Allen  
Phone: (904) 262-6626  
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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## **Southern Baptists expected to boycott Disney parks, stores**

ORLANDO (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention is expected to call a "targeted" boycott against the Walt Disney Co. when the convention meets in Dallas June 17-19, according to a report in the Orlando Sentinel.

"I'll probably recommend to the resolutions committee that they do a targeted boycott, probably the theme parks and the Disney [merchandise] stores," Richard Land, executive director of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, told the paper.

The chairman of the resolutions committee, Florida Baptist executive John Sullivan, told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram that three resolutions criticizing Disney have been submitted.

Last year in New Orleans the Southern Baptist Convention voted overwhelmingly to condemn Disney for what messengers considered a departure from the company's long-standing reputation for family entertainment.

That resolution, which called on Southern Baptists to "give serious and prayerful consideration" before buying Disney products, was widely reported as a boycott call. Convention officials, however, said they interpreted it as only a warning that Southern Baptists would boycott Disney if policies offensive to conservatives did not change.

The resolution directed Land to monitor Disney for the year following and to report his findings regarding a boycott at this year's meeting.

Land acknowledged that Disney's holdings are so extensive that "a general boycott is neither workable nor measurable."

Jim Henry, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and the pastor of Central Florida's largest Baptist church, voiced qualified support for the resolution.

Henry is undecided on how he will vote on the measure but said the proposed wording was "helpful in the sense that it targets one area" of the company.

Current SBC president Tom Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla., predicted a resolution will pass. "I would not think it at all unlikely for Southern Baptists to exercise their right to withhold their patronage from a company which has policies running counter to the biblical approach to human sexuality and family life," he said.

Disney officials have not responded to the Baptists' complaints.

Disney spokesman John Dreyer said he was under the impression that the group already had called for a boycott.

"They've been boycotting us for a year, and all of our businesses have done quite well," he said. The company has enjoyed record profits this year.

The 1996 resolution denounced Disney's "anti-Christian and anti-family trend."

The Baptists' complaints against Disney include the company's policy of granting health benefits to the partners of homosexual employees; its release of controversial films and books; and allowing "Gay Days" at Walt Disney World.

Wiley Drake, pastor of the First Southern Baptist Church of Buena Park, Calif., who offered the Disney boycott resolution in New Orleans, said he supported Land's recommendation.

"I like a pragmatic boycott," he said. "I agree with his targeting the Disney flagships," adding that "I'm hoping one day that Disney will come back to family values."

On several occasions since the resolution was passed, Henry has expressed skepticism about a boycott. But in the past year, Disney's actions have been "reprehensible," Henry said, adding that the company has done nothing to mend its ways -- or to even acknowledge Baptists' concerns.

"I'm still wrestling with the best way for us to be influential in bringing our message of faith to the total community, which includes the people at Disney," said Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando.

But another Orlando pastor, Charles Horton College Park Baptist Church, said a boycott "is not necessary and will not keep Baptists from going to Disney if they want to."

Horton, whose congregation is affiliated with both the conservative Southern Baptist Convention and the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, has disagreed with recent actions of the Southern Baptist Convention. He no longer attends the annual gatherings.

In an article in his church bulletin, Horton wrote that he also was disappointed with Disney's "gay-friendly" employment practices. But he said that in offering benefits, Disney officials "simply join other major corporations which already have such policies. Disney is not perfect, but neither are Baptists."

Land said Disney has "studiously ignored" the Baptists' New Orleans resolution apart from some "unofficial back-and-forth."

Several weeks after the vote, Disney Chairman Michael Eisner dismissed the Baptists' action as "foolish."

During the past year, Land said, "my mail and phone calls have been running 90-10 opposed to Disney."

However, he said he had no indication that any organized boycott had taken hold.

The April 30 coming-out episode of lesbian TV character "Ellen" on ABC, which is owned by Disney, was "another example of the sprint toward a politically correct posture by the Disney corporation, as opposed to a family correct posture," Land said.

Focusing on the Disney theme parks and merchandise outlets is logical for several reasons, Land said. In the past, because of their concentration in the Southeast and their affinity for family entertainment, Southern Baptists have patronized Disney in larger proportions than other denominations, Land said.

According to church records, in 1996 the convention had nearly 15.7 million members.

Land said that it did not matter that a targeted boycott by Baptists may not have much of an economic impact on Disney's bottom line.

"God never commanded us to be successful," he said. "He commanded us to be faithful."

## **Prospective NAMB trustee opposing 'ecumenical' meeting**

By Bob Allen

WICHITA FALLS, Texas (ABP) -- A trustee of the proposed North American Mission Board wants to forbid employees of the new Southern Baptist agency from attending an interdenominational gathering this fall in England.

William Streich, who in 1994 was a leading critic of Baptist involvement in a dialogue between evangelicals and Catholics, now is leading a charge to disassociate the NAMB from Reconciliation '97, a Sept. 1-7 meeting in Coventry, England. He also wants to establish a policy limiting the new agency's ecumenical involvement from the start.

Streich, a layman from Wichita Falls, Texas, is a trustee of the Home Mission Board, which is being replaced -- along with two other Southern Baptist agencies -- by the North American Mission Board. Streich is being nominated at the June 17-19 Southern Baptist Convention as a trustee to the NAMB. He says he will ask the new trustees to pull out of the Coventry conference at the board's inaugural meeting, June 19 in Dallas.

In a letter sent to other prospective trustees, Streich said 13 employees of the new agency are involved in leadership of the Coventry gathering, which he said is being planned in conjunction with the Church of England. By the end of the conference, which has been two years in planning, costs of involvement by HMB/NAMB staff will exceed \$100,000, he added.

Reached by telephone June 12, Streich called the Coventry meeting "an extreme ecumenical involvement" which he wants NAMB trustees "to deal with as a board."

A planner of the meeting, however, said the event has no denominational sponsors and is not an ecumenical gathering.

Conference organizer Reid Hardin, an HMB employee, described the conference as a grass-roots gathering of individuals interested in reconciliation among Christians. While participants come from various faith backgrounds, he said, the event has no official denominational sponsors.

"It's not an ecumenical meeting in the sense of trying to form a one world organization or church," said Hardin. "It is just a relational, spiritual, functional gathering for the encouragement of reconciliation, as Jesus calls for in John 17:20-23."

Streich, an opponent of ecumenical dialogue, charges that Southern Baptist participation in the conference would give credence to Anglican and Catholic teachings that many Baptists view as heretical and could compromise or undermine efforts by Baptists to evangelize members of other faiths.

He also claims it would violate a 1994 SBC resolution limiting religious dialogue to the work of the HMB's interfaith witness department. None of the 13 staff members attending the meeting work in that department, he said.

"We will have an opportunity to set the pace regarding the SBC's involvement in ecumenical activity," Streich wrote prospective NAMB trustees. "Either we can follow the lead of the world that cares only for unity with no prerequisite of truth, or we can tenaciously hold to those important, biblical truths which our convention has implored us to hold to."

According to its purpose statement, Reconciliation '97 will aim to "demonstrate God's power to bring us to personal salvation and to resolve other irreconcilable differences, affirming the unity of the Body of Christ and to embracing its diversity through loving and redemptive ministry in the broken places and relationships of the world."

Among workshops being offered at the meeting is "Baptist-Catholic Reconciliation," led by Frank Ruff, liaison to the Southern Baptist Convention from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Hardin, coordinator for renewal and reconciliation in the HMB's personal evangelism department, acknowledged that some participants and leaders represent Anglican and Catholic traditions. "We're not going to turn any Christians away," Hardin said.

But Hardin disputed Streich's contention that meeting with other Christians necessarily involves compromise.

"We believe we can come together and live together and work together with other Christians that we don't agree with," he said.

"The meeting of Christians together on a relational basis does not mean compromise, does not mean agreement on theology," Hardin said. "It just means we're meeting together in Christ seeking the same kind of reconciliation that the Trinity displays when the Father, Son and Holy Spirit work together."

In 1994, Streich failed in an effort to get Home Mission Board directors to renounce "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," a statement drafted by about 40 evangelical and Catholic leaders including HMB President Larry Lewis, who retired in January, and Richard Land, executive director of the Christian Life Commission.

Streich and other critics charged that theological statements in the document compromised on cardinal Baptist doctrines and hurt evangelism efforts, particularly for Baptists who labored in predominantly Catholic areas.

One Louisiana Baptist pastor was fired for insubordination after he publicly confronted Lewis for signing the document.

The Home Mission Board instead adopted a "resolution of intent" stating directors did not believe the document hindered evangelicals' ability to witness.

Streich and 10 other directors later signed an unofficial statement of dissent to that resolution and distanced themselves from the Evangelicals and Catholics accord.

Eventually, both Lewis and Land asked to have their signatures withdrawn from the document, claiming their reasons for signing it were misunderstood.

Hardin said the idea for the Coventry meeting came from his 25-year involvement in lay renewal, where he used a popular book called "Fire in Coventry" describing reconciliation between English and Germans following World War II.

"The primary vision came from a core group of 10-to-15 of us that were called together around the idea of repentance, renewal and reconciliation," he said.

Scheduled conference speakers include Promise Keepers founder Bill McCartney and Paul Cedar of the Missions 2000 church-starting movement. Woman's Missionary Union executive Dellanna O'Brien plans to attend the conference, along with other SBC leaders.

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## **SBC restructuring diminishes ethnic focus, longtime leader says**

By Kim Burke and Bob Allen

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The structure of a new North American Mission Board could set back Southern Baptists' emphasis on ethnic ministries, a long-time denominational leader in black-church relations warns.

Speaking to the Southern Baptist Historical Society in Richmond, Va., Emmanuel McCall, an African-American pastor in Atlanta who retired in 1991 after 23 years in black-church relations for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, departed from a prepared text to criticize the makeup of the agency which goes on-line June 19.

"I make a very painful statement," McCall said. "The reorganization that will be voted on next week at the SBC hints to a lack of concern and interest for ethnic and black presence in the SBC."

McCall, pastor of Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in College Park, Ga., said he was recently with a group of Hispanics who are raising the question of whether they should form their own convention in light of the new SBC structure. "It remains to be seen what will happen," he said.

The North American Mission Board, approved as part of a Southern Baptist Convention restructuring in 1995 and 1996, replaces the Alpharetta, Ga.,-based Home Mission Board and two other agencies, the Radio and Television Commission in Fort Worth, Texas, and the Brotherhood Commission in Memphis. The structure will be implemented when NAMB trustees meet following the June 17-19 SBC annual meeting in Dallas.

In his paper on "Baptists and the Civil War," McCall said Southern Baptists have progressed from their genesis over defending slavery to become one of the most racially inclusive denominational bodies in the United States.

Despite a 1995 SBC resolution apologizing to African-Americans for past discrimination, Southern Baptists are still struggling to reconcile the races, McCall said. "If ever black and white Baptists find true reconciliation, then, perhaps, America can be reborn," he said.

He cited the SBC restructuring as an example of how Southern Baptists are still struggling with race. After his presentation, McCall was asked to elaborate on his reference to the possible decline of ethnic ministry.

McCall responded that Home Mission Board programs emphasizing language and ethnic ministries and black-church extension are not being carried over into the North American Mission Board.

The restructuring also distances the agency from Woman's Missionary Union, which historically worked alongside the HMB to support ethnic work. "Now that the WMU has been set aside and now that there is no place for those other emphases in the SBC, the question is where will black and ethnic persons appear?" McCall asked.

The NAMB will have one church-growth specialist for each of four ethnic identities -- Korean, Hispanic, Native-American, and African-American.

"But that far decimates the emphasis that has been historic in the SBC," McCall noted. "It means that there is no ... intentional development of churches" in ethnic areas, he said.

McCall said "I don't buy" one explanation that was given for the change -- that Southern Baptist attitudes about race have progressed to the point that focused work on minorities is no longer needed.

"Anybody that takes that position does not know what is going on either in American society or the SBC," he said.

During a dialogue, prospective NAMB trustee Toni Clevenger of Pensacola, Fla., asked McCall how he knew so much about staffing since a detailed structure has not been adopted.

So far, the special task force which is setting up the new agency has reported only a sketch of the new structure dividing the agency's 350 workers into five areas. That's 165 fewer workers than the combined staff of the three agencies being merged.

Officials acknowledge that some areas of work will take a lower profile in the structure than in the past, but say they plan to address them through a "matrix" structure in which all positions interact to perform overall goals.

"You only have to talk to the staff of the HMB to find out who's coming and who is gone" McCall responded. "I have this advantage living in Atlanta and I still go back and forth to the board because this is where my heart has been."

McCall said the structure has for all purposes been determined. "It's just a matter of going through the formality of voting on it," he said. "So we know what the structure will be, we know what people will be there, and we know what people will not be there. This is how we're informed."

Robert Reccord, the Virginia pastor who will be nominated as the North American Mission Board's first president June 19 and former chair of the SBC's implementation task force, could not be reached for comment.

## **Texas town hit by church fires gathers to rejoice a year later**

By Ken Camp

GREENVILLE, Texas (ABP) -- A year after two deliberately set church fires brought national attention to Greenville, Texas, residents gathered in worship, thanking God for both rebuilt churches and for a healing that crossed racial lines.

"The Adversary meant it for evil, but God meant it for good," Houston McLendon, pastor of Greenville's predominantly African-American Bethlehem Baptist Church, told worshipers who filled Wesley United Methodist Church for the June 9 celebration service.

A year before, arson destroyed two predominantly African-American churches in the community. Fires which destroyed the New Light House of Prayer and seriously damaged the Church of the Living God signaled the beginning of a long summer of suspicious fires, mostly in a black neighborhood on the city's north side.

Those fires drew worldwide media attention to the Northeast Texas community and attracted groups ranging from the New Black Panther Party to the Ku Klux Klan.

The Greenville fires also coincided with President Clinton's appointment of a task force to coordinate investigations into a rash of fires at throughout the South.

The task force, which released its report the day before the Greenville worship service, concluded there was no evidence of any nationwide, racially motivated conspiracy targeting African-American churches.

The task force acknowledged, however, that houses of worship were continuing to be burned. In fact, an abandoned Methodist church just south of Greenville burned in the early morning hours of June 9.

While that fire once again drew media attention to Greenville, residents at the citywide worship service focused their attention on blessings of the past year.

"If you hang with God, he'll give you double for your trouble," said keynote speaker McLendon, who recently was elected to Greenville's city council.

New friendships were forged between white and black ministers and relationships developed between mostly African-American and mostly Anglo churches in the past year, he said.

McLendon also pointed out that the two burned-out churches now have larger, newer and finer facilities than they did before the fires, thanks to the cooperation of their neighbors and concerned Christians around the state.

The non-profit Greenville United Coalition, a group of local businesses, churches and community leaders, was created in the aftermath of the fires.

White Baptists in Texas provided labor for the construction, which was started during a January ice storm. The New Light House of Prayer recently held its first services inside its new building, and the Church of the Living God is scheduled to be completed later this month.

Jean Holliman of Sanger, one of the construction volunteers, wrote that she and her colleagues were "bridge builders for God in Greenville."

Melvin Ray, a Southern Baptist chaplain and director of pastoral care for Presbyterian Hospital of Greenville, pointed out that when the two churches were burned last summer, the first group to respond was the city's clergy.

A group of ministers met in his office the morning after the fires to pray and to draft a statement on racial reconciliation. Wesley United Methodist Church opened its doors for an interracial prayer meeting that evening. And a week later, citizens of all races filled the local high school football stadium for a citywide worship service.

## **Clinton offers bill to ban human cloning**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Clinton announced June 10 he is sending legislation to Congress that would ban cloning to produce a human child.

"Attempting to clone a human being is unacceptably dangerous to the child and morally unacceptable to our society," Clinton said at a Rose Garden ceremony announcing the legislation.

The bill, based on recommendations of the National Bioethics Commission, would allow the cloning of genes and animals for use in medical research or agriculture. Critics of the bill said it does not go far enough.

Rep. Vernon Ehlers, R.-Mich., plans to introduce a bill that would ban all human cloning and human embryo research, a stronger stance than that of the federal commission.

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-- By ABP staff

CLARIFICATION: Please substitute the following story for the version with the same headline issued June 10. This version changes wording in the first two paragraphs.

## **High court rejects N.J. city's appeal of ruling against religious displays (revised)**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A New Jersey city's 30-year practice of displaying a Christian Nativity scene and a Jewish menorah in front of city hall violates the Constitution's ban on establishment of religion, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed June 9.

The high court refused to review a ruling by the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that official holiday displays in Jersey City, N.J., "cannot be viewed as anything but a constitutionally impermissible dual endorsement of Christianity and Judaism."

The American Civil Liberties Union and four city residents sued to halt the Christmas and Hanukkah displays in 1994. City officials ignored a federal judge's order barring the displays in 1995 but added plastic figures of Santa Claus and Frosty the Snowman and a wooden sled.

But the addition of secular symbols failed to remedy the endorsement of two religions, the appeals court said, reversing a separate lower-court ruling.

The display of a creche at the seat of city government "impermissibly conveyed a message of government endorsement of religion," the appeals court said. "And, in our view, the city's addition of Santa, Frosty, and a red sled did little to secularize that message."

The court also rejected an argument by the city that a Nativity scene is a secular symbol.

"A creche represents the Christian belief that Jesus was born to the Virgin Mary to lead humankind on a path toward salvation and redemption," the appeals court said. "Yet Jersey City would have us believe that the symbol of the creche has achieved such a level of secular status that is religiously benign. We are not so persuaded."

The appeals court analyzed Jersey City's displays in light of two previous Supreme Court rulings.

In 1984, the Supreme Court allowed a winter holiday display in Pawtucket, R.I. The exhibit, owned by the city but situated in a private park, included a Nativity scene along with several secular symbols.

In 1989, however, the court struck down a creche displayed at the county courthouse in Allegheny County, Pa., saying the display at the seat of county government amounted to an unconstitutional endorsement of religion. In the same ruling, the court permitted a menorah to be displayed next to a Christmas tree outside a county-city building.

In another church-state dispute, the Supreme Court declined to review an order that a New York village must revise its zoning code to permit worship in private homes.

The federal government sued Airmont, N.Y., in 1991, claiming that zoning policies against residential worship discriminate against Orthodox Jews, who worship primarily in homes.

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