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Motions forbid 'evolutionary' language, call for changing 'Baptist Faith and Message'

By Mark Wingfield and Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention adopted a motion halting "evolutionary ideologies" in denominational magazines after a messenger protested a reference to a million-year-old civilization in a Woman's Missionary Union publication.

Another motion passed at the June 17-19 convention in Dallas calls for adding a statement on the family to the SBC's official doctrinal stance.

Derek Staples, an SBC messenger from Lewisport, Ky., introduced a motion asking all denominational agencies and auxiliaries "to refrain from the use of evolutionary ideology in the distribution of all materials."

The motion alleges "language that espouses evolutionary ideology" in recent WMU printed materials which Staples said contradicts the Bible.

Staples said he referred specifically to articles published in WMU's *Aware* magazine and *Aware* resource kit for April-May-June 1997. The articles "state that people have lived in China for more than 1 million years," he reported.

WMU officials said no such reference appeared in the *Aware* magazine cited, although they admitted it was used in one small segment of a teaching strip in the *Aware* resource kit. The teaching kit is an optional item available to workers in WMU-sponsored missions programs for young girls.

Many conservative Christians interpret the Bible's accounts of human creation literally and say they cannot be reconciled with the scientific theory of evolution. Some, but not all, "creationists" believe the world was created in six days and is about 6,000 years old.

In presenting the case for his motion to SBC messengers, Staples said "theological fidelity" is at stake in this issue.

"As a parent of three small children, it is important to me that we as Southern Baptists state clearly what we believe on this issue ... so they will have the clear, unadulterated, authoritative, inerrant word of God."

No one spoke against the motion, and it passed on a show of hands vote.

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In a brief statement later in the day, WMU Executive Director Dellanna O'Brien said: "We certainly are committed to presenting the truth in the Scripture. Because of that we have doctrinal readers for everything we produce.

"There's always the possibility of something slipping through that might offend," she continued, noting the SBC resolution serves as "a good reminder to us to keep a watchful eye."

Another motion, by Charles Lawson of Linthicum, Md., asked SBC president Tom Elliff to appoint a committee to propose an amendment to the "Baptist Faith and Message," adding a section on the family to the convention's official doctrinal statement.

Lawson said the statement is needed because of "a concerted attack on the family" in society. "The very meaning of family has been redefined by those whose agenda it is to include homosexual couples and generalized to include any two people living together," he said.

If approved next year, it would be the first amendment to the document since it was approved by the convention in 1963.

Most of 35 motions suggested by convention messengers were referred to various agencies of the SBC. Trustees of those agencies will consider referred motions during the next year and report any action at next year's annual meeting in Salt Lake City.

One motion referred to the North American Mission Board calls for a "thorough study of homosexuality" and new ministry resources aimed at helping gays to leave homosexual lifestyles.

Another calls for training "10,000 soldiers of the cross" to participate next summer in a pre-convention evangelistic blitz in predominantly Mormon Salt Lake City. The convention city is home to the headquarters of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which Southern Baptists officially consider a cult.

A new video, "The Mormon Puzzle," designed to familiarize Southern Baptists with Mormon teachings, was introduced at the convention and is available for sale through the SBC's North American Mission Board.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: This story updates and replaces one on resolutions released June 18.

Resolutions target Disney, address social issues

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- It could be a small world after all -- a world without the Disney Channel, ESPN, ABC television and more than 200 other subsidiaries of Walt Disney Co. -- for those who heed the Southern Baptist Convention's call to boycott one of the world's largest media and entertainment companies.

As expected, messengers at the SBC annual meeting in Dallas voted to follow through with the Disney boycott threatened at last year's convention in New Orleans. But instead of a "targeted" boycott suggested by one leader prior to the June 17-19 convention, the SBC resolutions committee presented a far-reaching boycott of everything associated with Disney.

The resolution "on moral stewardship and the Disney Company" avoids the word "boycott" but asks the nearly 16 million Southern Baptists to "refrain from patronizing" Disney "and any of its related entities."

Other SBC resolutions adopted called attention to religious persecution and world hunger, supported religious displays in public buildings and opposed cloning and "gender-inclusive" language in Bible translations.

The Disney resolution accuses the family entertainment company of "increasingly promoting immoral ideologies such as homosexuality, infidelity and adultery." Among offenses cited by Disney critics are a policy offering health-insurance benefits to the domestic partners of homosexual employees, allowing the continuation of "Gay Days" at theme parks and the distribution of R-rated movies through Disney subsidiaries.

Most recently, the Disney-owned ABC network introduced television's first leading homosexual character in an April airing of "Ellen."

The resolution asks Southern Baptists to avoid spending on any Disney products, charging Disney has abandoned its commitment to family values.

In addition to Disney's three well-known theme parks, the company also owns the American Broadcasting Company -- which includes ABC television network, ESPN, A&E network, more than 20 affiliated radio and TV stations, and a long list of trade journals, medical journals and software. Other entities include The Disney Channel and Disney-owned film companies such as Walt Disney Pictures, Touchstone Pictures and Miramax Films. The Disney conglomerate also includes vacation planning services, publishing companies and more than 20 general interest newspapers or magazines.

In addition to targeting Disney, the resolution also calls for extending the boycott to "any company that promotes immoral ideologies and practices, realizing that the Disney Company is not the only such provider."

Disney officials issued a brief response noting the company "creates more family entertainment of every kind than anyone else in the world."

"We plan to continue our leadership role and in fact we will increase production of family entertainment," the statement said.

In debate over the resolution, messenger Rick Markham of Snellville, Ga., opposed the boycott, equating Southern Baptists with 20th-century Pharisees. "This us-versus-them mentality is deadly," he said. "We are just reacting to an extreme while positioning ourselves at the other extreme."

Lisa Kinney, a messenger from Keene Terrace Baptist Church in Largo, Fla., drew applause for telling the crowd turning off their TVs for a while would be no great loss.

"Will the Southern Baptist boycott on Disney change Disney? I don't know," she said. "Will it change us? Yes. We will show we love Jesus more than our entertainment."

The convention rejected an amendment by Walter Price, a messenger from First Southern Baptist Church in Beaumont, Calif., which would have limited the boycott to one designated month to emphasize its impact.

Resolutions committee chairman John Sullivan spoke against the amendment, comparing it to an earlier suggestion for a more narrowly targeted boycott of theme parks and merchandise stores.

"I'm against this for the same reason I'm against a targeted boycott," said Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention. "If we say it is OK 11 months out of the year but not 12, we will seem hypocritical."

Wiley Drake, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Buena Park, Calif., who introduced last year's Disney resolution, pledged to press for boycotting other companies deemed sympathetic to homosexuality.

"Just because we can't boycott everything doesn't mean we should not boycott one," Drake said, adding that the potential negative image of the Southern Baptist Convention should not be a concern. "Jesus had a negative image when he kicked the merchants out of the temple."

After pressing for an SBC boycott against Disney in 1996, Drake said he continued to use his family pass to Disneyland the rest of the year.

"The pass ran through December, so Disney already had the money," he explained. "It gave me a chance to be on the inside at Disney."

Though denied a chance to speak during debate, former SBC president Jim Henry told reporters he strongly opposed the boycott. "The world will hear 'boycott' and [think] that we are against homosexuals," said Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla. "We are against the practice of homosexuality, not against people."

Henry urged Southern Baptists to ignore the resolution, saying they are more likely to influence Disney through witnessing contacts than a boycott.

Other messengers interviewed came down on both sides of the issue.

"I'm in favor of writing a letter but not in favor of boycotting," said Tammy McCraw of Lynchburg, Va. "We can't be their conscience. Disney never claimed to be a Christian organization. I go into Disney stores all the time. They're going to make money regardless."

Rubye Click of Wichita, Kan., said she planned to observe the boycott. "I love Disney and I've always gone to it, but I would not go back. We have to take a stand."

Jim McCain, a pastor from Decatur, Ga., said he voted for the resolution but fears Southern Baptists may look foolish if they do not back up the words with action. "If we're not careful we'll become a convention of sayers and not doers. It will make us look like hypocrites, and Disney will get it in the press ... that we didn't do what we said."

Other SBC resolutions:

-- Urged Americans to refrain from international trade with nations which practice religious persecution.

-- Called on Southern Baptists to promote the denominational world-hunger drive through World Hunger Day on Oct. 12.

-- Asked Texas Gov. George W. Bush to call a special session for action on legislation aimed at protecting charities from a \$1 billion class-action lawsuit.

-- Asked courts to uphold public displays of the Ten Commandments in government offices and courthouses.

-- Opposed "gender-inclusive language" in new Bible translations. Weeks before the convention, several SBC leaders joined in criticizing one publisher for considering more gender-neutral language in a new translation. Afterward, the publisher withdrew those plans.

-- Opposed prenatal genetic testing "for the purpose of abortion decisions" and asked for laws prohibiting research on human embryos, cloning of human beings and the release of information gathered through genetic testing.

The resolution committee declined to act on a statement on local church autonomy and women's ordination recommended by a Los Angeles filmmaker critical of the convention's stance against women pastors.

After learning his resolution would not be presented for debate, Steven Lipscomb, a messenger from First Baptist Church in Knoxville, Tenn., brought a motion asking the convention to require the resolutions committee to give a written report on the disposition of all resolutions submitted to the committee.

Lipscomb's motion was referred to the SBC Executive Committee.

Lipscomb's resolution was one of 55 considered by the committee. The committee declined to act on 35 of them.

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-- Jennifer Rogers contributed to this story.

Southern Baptists re-elect Elliff, pick Seaborn as first VP

By Jennifer Rogers

DALLAS (ABP) -- Oklahoma pastor Tom Elliff was unopposed in his bid for a traditional second year as president of the Southern Baptist Convention June 17.

"I'm overwhelmed," said Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla., after his election at the June 17-19 convention in Dallas.

Elliff, a former missionary who has been pastor at the suburban Oklahoma City church for 12 years, was nominated by retired pastor Ralph Smith amidst a ripple of applause and cheers.

Smith said Elliff, the latest in a string of conservative presidents, is a man of integrity who "stands squarely on the Word of God."

In another election, Miles Seaborn, pastor of Birchman Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas, was elected first vice president of the 15 million-member convention.

Seaborn was nominated by pastor Stan Coffey of Amarillo, Texas. "God is looking for leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention that are tried and proven," Coffey said. He praised Seaborn's previous service as a missionary, father and trustee at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Seaborn defeated Dennis Hansen, director of missions for Bay Lakes Association in Wisconsin. Hanson was nominated by Oshkosh, Wis., pastor Tim Shrader, who called him a man who has "dedicated his life to missions."

Split results in the election of second vice president forced a run-off between Bill Wagner of California and David Galvan of Texas June 18. Galvan, pastor of Primera Iglesia Bautista Nueva Vida in Garland, took the position with 57.53 percent of the vote.

John Yeats of Indianapolis, editor of the Indiana Baptist, was elected recording secretary over Mark Brooks of Springdale, Ark.

Longtime registration secretary Lee Porter of Lawrenceville, Ga., was re-elected without opposition.

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SBC asks Texas governor to call legislative session

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Southern Baptists have asked Texas Gov. George W. Bush to call a special session of the state legislature to protect charitable organizations from a lawsuit that could amount to \$1 billion.

Messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention in Dallas voted June 18 to ask the governor to call lawmakers back to Austin to enact Senate Bill 1948. The law is designed to stop a lawsuit that could strip funds from charitable organizations nationwide.

The suit, *Richie vs. American Council on Gift Annuities et al*, was initiated in late 1994 by Dorothy Ozee of Wichita Falls, Texas, the grandniece of Louise T. Peter, also of Wichita Falls.

Peter, granddaughter of an early leader of the Lutheran Church in Texas, began making plans to leave her estate to the Lutheran Church and its charities in 1972. In 1988, she gave a sizable portion of that estate to the Lutheran Foundation of Texas in return for a charitable gift annuity.

A gift annuity is a donation made to a charity with the stipulation that some of the money will be returned as income to the donor. The donor receives a tax break for the gift and draws regular income from the charity, and the charity obtains the bulk of the gift at the donor's death.

The suit claimed charities violated federal securities and antitrust laws. It also accused the Lutheran foundation of undue influence.

The case was expanded into a class-action suit in 1995. That suit also named the American Council on Gift Annuities and several affiliated organizations, including the Southern Baptist Convention, the Baptist Foundation of Texas, the American Bible Society, the Salvation Army, the American Red Cross, the Boy Scouts of America and 1,900 charities nationwide.

Legal analysts predicted the suit could reap untold millions of dollars in funds from those religious organizations and non-profit charities.

The suit prompted legislative response.

In 1995, the U.S. Congress passed two federal bills designed to end the lawsuit. That same year, the Texas Legislature also ratified two bills with the same intent.

But in 1996, a federal court denied the charities' motion to dismiss the lawsuit, noting the new laws did not cover all the legal problems related to the issue. In particular, the laws did not address non-charity organizations affiliated with the American Council on Gift Annuities.

Further, in April of this year, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals also ruled the new laws were not sufficient to cover legal problems posed by the suit.

However, the circuit court's ruling "provides a blueprint to make the changes necessary to satisfy the courts," reported Tal Roberts, chair of the council and executive vice president of the Baptist Foundation of Texas.

Subsequently, two new bills were introduced into the Texas legislature this spring, and two other bills have been introduced in Congress, Roberts said.

The federal bills were introduced simultaneously in the U.S. House and Senate June 17, Roberts said. One of the Texas bills was passed into law, but the other one was killed by a technical measure in the waning hours of the session.

And that's where the SBC messengers entered the fray, asking Gov. Bush to call the special session so lawmakers can pass the bill -- S.B. 1948 -- and protect the charities.

"The Southern Baptist Convention ... finds that it is critical to all charitable and religious organizations such legislation be enacted in Texas," the resolution states.

Although observers earlier felt the special session was a remote possibility, chances are improving that Bush will call the session, some observers said. The day before the resolution asking for the session was passed, Bush attended the SBC annual meeting, welcoming messengers to Texas. In a related matter, messengers approved a recommendation presented by the SBC Executive Committee asking SBC agencies to comply with a court request to provide documents relevant to the suit instead of spending convention funds to fight the order.

"The Southern Baptist Convention has not done anything illegal or injurious to the plaintiff and has strongly denied the plaintiff's allegations of wrongdoing," the recommendation says.

The recommendation notes, "It is abhorrent to the polity of the Southern Baptist Convention" to "enter into the offices of any entity of the Southern Baptist Convention for the purpose of reviewing its files, removing or copying its documents, gathering information to respond to discovery requests"

But it also notes the courts can "order monetary penalties or other sanctions against" the SBC if it fails to comply. And it asserts the convention "prefers conserving its resources for spreading the good news of Jesus Christ rather than spending its funds on litigation and appeals."

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