

Associated Baptist Press

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Disney boycott expands after leaders charge snub

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Two groups joined the Southern Baptist Convention's boycott against Walt Disney Co. July 23 after leaders from pro-family organizations claimed they were snubbed by a Disney official at a closed-door meeting in Washington.

King for America, a new organization led by Alveda King, niece of Martin Luther King, joined the boycott, as did Concerned Women for America, a 500,000-member organization led by Beverly LaHaye.

Concerned Women for America, which formed originally to oppose the Equal Rights Amendment, normally does not participate in boycotts, said Jim Woodall, the group's chief executive officer. "Unfortunately, because Disney has refused to address our concerns regarding their anti-family agenda, we feel we must call this boycott," Woodall said.

Other groups including Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council and D. James Kennedy's Coral Ridge Ministries normally do not participate in boycotts but were said to be considering an exception after a meeting set up to allow leaders of several groups to air grievances with Disney Executive Vice President John Cooke.

At the last minute, Cooke canceled, saying he had been invited to introduce Secretary of State Madeline Albright at a meeting in Los Angeles. He offered to reschedule and sent a vice president, who reportedly offered no solutions. After the meeting, conservative leaders accused Disney of stonewalling.

"I know when I've been dissed, and I'm going to make sure Southern Baptists know they've been dissed," said Richard Land, head of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

At its annual convention in June, the SBC asked its 15.6 million members to "refrain from patronizing" Disney and its more than 200 related entities. Other smaller denominations and the American Family Association previously joined the boycott.

Those groups criticize Disney on several fronts. They accuse the company of promoting homosexuality by allowing "gay days" at its theme parks, offering domestic-partner benefits to homosexual employees and the "outing" episode of Ellen on Disney-owned ABC. They also criticize anti-religious and sexually explicit movies

released through Disney subsidiaries. Some critics say recent animated features including "The Lion King" and "The Little Mermaid" contain hidden sexual images that can be seen by freeze-framing the videos.

Disney officials have defended the company's family entertainment.

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-- By ABP staff

Baptist volunteers wait for floodwaters to recede

By Jennifer Davis Rash

MOBILE, Ala. (ABP) -- It was a game of hurry up and wait for eager Baptist volunteers ready to tackle the aftermath of Hurricane Danny along the Alabama coast.

Disaster-relief volunteers waited for floodwaters left by up to 30-inch rainfall totals to recede before damages could be assessed. "We are ready to go but waiting for a definite word," said Reggie Quimby, Brotherhood associate for the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

In the meantime, while scattered rains continued to delay rescuers, Quimby began organizing disaster-relief efforts with the Baldwin Baptist Association as well as with Baptists in Georgia and South Carolina. Mud-out and cleanup-recovery efforts will be the primary focus.

Some 150 homes along Fish River in Baldwin County were hit by the July 19-20 storm that beat the area with hurricane-force winds for about 24 hours. Three-day rainfall totals in some areas neared amounts that normally fall in a year.

Mobile County escaped with only minor reports of roof damage, flooding and downed tree limbs. Of Baptist churches in that area, Woodmont Baptist Church in Mobile received the heaviest damage when a mudslide hit the side of the church. Pastor Lou Fortier said the church suffered only minor flooding, but mud piled against its foundation will have to be removed as soon as possible. "It is not something we can do ourselves," he said, noting that heavy equipment will be required to move the mud.

While several churches and residents were still assessing damage, volunteer teams lined up to clean up Baldwin County homes that were almost totally submerged over the weekend.

Once furnishings and appliances are removed, mud must be shoveled out. Then homes can be washed with a power-pressure sprayer. The house must then totally dry out before it can be repaired and moved back into. "It is a long process and that process is only delayed when the rains continue," Quimby said.

While Quimby planned to invite mud-out teams from Georgia and South Carolina to help with the relief efforts because their units are better specialized for such work, some local Baldwin County Baptist volunteers were also ready for action.

The first group leading cleanup efforts were members of First Baptist Church of Bay Minette, six summer missionaries from Baldwin Association and two US-2 missionaries assigned to resort ministries. The volunteer group was expected to help an elderly couple from Fish River Baptist Church as soon as they could get down the dirt road leading to the couple's house, said Ron Jackson, their pastor.

"Their house was inundated with water up to the door tops and they have just about lost everything," Jackson said. The church is currently furnishing the couple a place to stay.

Loyd Kindiger, director of church development for the Baldwin Association, said the group planned to begin the cleanup process on Wednesday, July 23. There also are six other requests for help, Kindiger noted.

"The cleanup process will probably take a couple of weeks," he said.

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Yeltsin vetoes measure restricting religious liberty

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Russian President Boris Yeltsin has vetoed a law that would have placed sharp curbs on evangelicals, Catholics and other minority religious groups in Russia.

Yeltsin said the law passed overwhelmingly by the Russian Duma and supported by the Russian Orthodox Church violated Russia's constitution.

Religious and human rights groups had eagerly anticipated Yeltsin's decision on whether to sign or veto the measure. President Clinton, U.S. lawmakers and Pope John Paul II were among outsiders urging Yeltsin to use his veto power to protect religious liberty in Russia.

In addition, the U.S. Senate recently attached a rider to a foreign-aid bill that would have withheld \$200 million earmarked for Russia if Yeltsin signed the measure.

The restrictions in the new law did not affect Russia's established faiths -- Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism.

But newer, smaller religious groups would have faced registration requirements and would have been forced to wait up to 15 years to gain legal status allowing them to own property or have bank accounts.

A church-state specialist applauded Yeltsin's action.

"All those so eager to arm-twist Mr. Yeltsin for his veto should now communicate their appreciation to him for this most courageous act," said James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington-based religious liberty agency.

Yeltsin's move drew quick praise from U.S. officials.

Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, R-N.Y., chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, welcomed Yeltsin's veto.

"I have on various occasions been critical of Mr. Yeltsin and his government," D'Amato said. "However, to give him credit, he has consistently stood up for religious freedom for all believers in his country. His stand this time was especially courageous when we consider that the bill was passed overwhelmingly by both houses of the Russian parliament."

Sen. Robert Bennett, R-Utah, said Yeltsin "clearly understands the far-reaching damage to the advancement and well-being of his people which would result if this bill were to become law."

Yeltsin's veto coincided with the release of a U.S. State Department report on religious persecution around the world. The report noted that since the breakup of the Soviet Union, "the overall climate for religious freedom in Russia has improved dramatically, and made possible a large increase in the activities of foreign missionaries."

That growing missionary activity, the report states, troubled some parts of Russian society, particularly "nationalists and factions of the Russian Orthodox Church."

The report also noted that about one-fourth of Russia's 89 regional governments had passed local laws more restrictive on religious liberty than the current national law, passed in 1990.

Briefing reporters just before news broke of Yeltsin's veto, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said Yeltsin faced a "very difficult choice" about whether to sign the law.

"This is a very complex issue, and the prevailing public sentiment and media sentiment in Russia is for him not to veto," Burns said.

He added that "no one has done more for freedom of religion and speech and press in Russia than Boris Yeltsin, and we have to be mindful of that as we go along."

State Department report details Christian persecution

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A congressionally mandated State Department report spotlights Christian persecution around the world and highlights U.S. efforts to promote religious freedom abroad.

The 83-page report details instances of persecution in such places as China, the Sudan, Iran and Kuwait. It also describes Saudi Arabia as a country where "freedom of religion does not exist" and Russia as a nation where the overall climate for religious freedom has improved but is now threatened by legislation that would impose new restrictions on religious groups.

Following Congress' mandate, the report's country-by-country analysis focuses largely on Christian persecution. But administration officials emphasized the government's commitment to pursuing religious liberty for people of all faiths as a basic human right.

"Religious freedom is a fundamental human right, and the United States vigorously condemns persecution against any believer and all faiths," President Clinton said.

Last year, as part of an omnibus appropriations bill, Congress ordered a report showing how the United States is working "to reduce and eliminate today's mounting persecution of Christians throughout the world."

In releasing the report, John Shattuck, assistant secretary for democracy, human rights and labor, noted that at Congress' request, the report focuses on Christians. Shattuck told reporters that Christian persecution "has received very little treatment in terms of fact-gathering in the past."

A number of conservative lawmakers and groups have called for more attention to Christian persecution.

"I think it's a real landmark and it will have an impact, because it singles out Christians for the first time," said Nina Shea of Freedom House, one of the groups pushing Congress and the administration for more efforts to curb Christian persecution.

"It will send a signal within the government that this is an issue of urgency and help sensitize the foreign policy bureaucracy who have been notoriously tone deaf to the issue of religious persecution, particularly as it pertains to Christians," Shea added.

While applauding the emphasis on promoting religious freedom, a Baptist religious-liberty specialist expressed reservations about the mandated focus on Christian persecution.

"This administration is correct in its commitment to religious freedom for all," said James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee. "When anyone's religious liberty is denied, everyone's religious liberty is in danger."

The report details a broad range of activities undertaken by U.S. officials to combat religious intolerance and promote religious liberty, including last year's establishment of a 20-member Advisory Committee on Religious Freedom Abroad.

The State Department report provides a country-by-country analysis of 78 nations, showing both the situations faced by Christians and actions taken by the U.S. government to foster human rights and religious liberty.

Among its findings:

-- The government of Burma "imposes several severe restrictions on fundamental freedoms." Christians and Muslim groups have difficulty getting permission to build new churches and mosques. The U.S. government monitors restrictions on religious freedom and other human rights and has suspended financial assistance and imposed an arms embargo and a ban on new U.S. investment in the country.

-- Under China's constitution, citizens "enjoy freedom of religious belief," but the government restricts actual religious practice to government-authorized religious organizations and registered places of worship. During the past three years, Chinese authorities have cracked down on the activities of unregistered Catholic and Protestant movements. In addition authorities have tightened restrictions on Tibetan Buddhism and curtailed religious activities in the predominantly Muslim Xinjiang Autonomous Region.

In response, U.S. officials have made religious freedom a major focus of bilateral discussions with Chinese officials and co-sponsored United Nations resolutions addressing human rights issues in China.

-- In Cuba, the government has "eased the harsher aspects of its repression of religious freedom" in recent years, but religious persecution continues. The United States has no diplomatic relations with Cuba but "continuously marshals international pressure on the Cuban government to cease its repressive practices."

-- Egypt's constitution provides for freedom of belief and practice. Non-Muslim minorities "worship without harassment" for the most part. Proselytizing is not a specific crime, but Muslim converts to Christianity have been charged under a law that prohibits use of religion to "ignite strife, degrade any of the heavenly religions or harm national unity or social peace." Terrorists continue to attack properties owned by Christians and target and kill Christians.

U.S. officials maintain dialogue with the Egyptian government on all human rights issues and publicly condemned the killing of Coptic Christians by terrorists.

-- France has a law separating church and state but the U.S. officials are monitoring a Parliamentary Commission on Sects that has identified 172 groups as sects, including Jehovah's Witnesses.

-- In Iran, Islam is the official religion. The government restricts religious freedom for Muslim sects other than Ja'fari Shi'ism and religious minorities, including Christians. Non-Muslims may not proselytize Muslims and Muslims who convert to another faith are considered apostates and may be subject to the death penalty. Four Baha'is convicted of apostasy in 1996 remain in prison under death sentences. Official oppression of evangelical Christians increased in 1996.

The United States has no diplomatic relations with Iran but worked through the Swiss embassy to obtain the release of Daniel Baumann, a Swiss-American, and one of two Christian evangelists arrested and detained under suspicion of espionage in January.

-- Islam is also the official state religion of Kuwait and proselytizing among Muslims is prohibited. In 1996, the United States raised concerns about Qambar "Robert" Hussein, a Kuwaiti citizen who converted to Christianity and was found by a Kuwaiti family court to be an "apostate."

-- Russia's new constitution and a 1990 law provide religious freedom. The "climate for religious freedom in Russia has improved dramatically" since the breakup of the Soviet Union. However, the Russian legislature recently passed a law that would impose new government restrictions on religious groups, particularly those relatively new to Russia or with small numbers of followers. (The day the State Department report was released, President Yeltsin vetoed the measure.)

-- In Saudi Arabia, where Islam is the official religion, "freedom of religion does not exist." Non-Muslim worshipers risk arrest, lashing and deportation for engaging in religious activities that attracts official attention. U.S. officials have repeatedly raised human-rights concerns with Saudi officials.

-- The military regime in Sudan states that all religions should be respected but treats Islam as "the defacto state religion." The forced conversion to Islam of Christians, animists and other faiths "takes place as part of government policy." The United States has worked bilaterally and through the United Nations to rectify human rights abuses in Sudan.

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Critics of constitutional amendment say plan would create majority rule

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Skeptical lawmakers posed a barrage of questions to an Oklahoma congressman proposing a Religious Freedom Amendment to the United States Constitution at a hearing July 22.

The amendment, sponsored by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., would allow some forms of school-sponsored prayer and government-endorsed religious speech. It also would require religious groups equal access to public

"benefits," paving the constitutional path for school vouchers and other plans funneling aid to pervasively sectarian groups such as churches.

Istook claims the measure is needed to correct court decisions which have removed religious expression from the public square. He said the measure would protect student activities such as reading the Bible on a bus, wearing religious symbols and displaying the Ten Commandments on public property.

At the hearing by the House Constitution Subcommittee, however, several lawmakers and witnesses suggested that much of what the amendment's supporters are seeking is already protected by current law.

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, said amendment proponents should follow the Ten Commandments' call for honesty. He said citations used by amendment supporters to prove that religious freedom is in peril are "inaccurate at best and misleading at worst."

Edwards said God has not been taken out of public places. "No one has the power to remove an all-powerful, ever-present God from any place on this Earth."

"In the name of protecting religious liberty," the amendment "could damage religious freedom," he said, noting that the measure would mark the first change to the Bill of Rights.

Rep. Tom Campbell, R-Calif., disagreed. The "First Amendment has been amended many times," he said. "The difference is that it's been amended by the courts."

The text of the Istook proposal reads: "To secure the people's right to acknowledge God according to the dictates of conscience: The people's right to pray and to recognize their religious beliefs, heritage or traditions on public property, including schools, shall not be infringed. The government shall not require any person to join in prayer or other religious activity, prescribe school prayers, discriminate against religion, or deny equal access to a benefit on account of religion."

Derek Davis, director of the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies at Baylor University, said the measure is "very ambiguous" and would "trivialize" religion.

He said the measure would allow prayers to be spoken but would not permit teachers to discuss their meaning. "These prayers would have to take place without comment. To me that trivializes religion. Meaningful faith is faith which occurs in an environment in which studying and meaningful instruction can take place," he said.

The Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty released a statement saying the Istook amendment is unnecessary to protect religious expression and would "permit government to coerce, control and compromise religion."

"Whose prayer will be prayed?" the coalition of religious and civil-liberties groups asked. "Which faith groups will get more days for their prayer? Who will assign prayer opportunities? What will the children who object to the prayer do during prayer time?"

Lawmakers peppered Istook with questions about the proposal.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., said Istook's amendment would force minorities to either participate in prayer or leave the classroom.

Istook denied the minority would be forced to leave. "Some people have the notion that if you don't like what somebody else is saying, you have to make a demonstration and make a big case and walk out of it and not listen to something with which you may disagree," he said.

Edwards said the proposal creates a dilemma: "Either you have full censorship of student-initiated school prayers or you must allow all religions to have equal access to the public vacuum of school prayer."

He quoted passages from a satanic reading. "I absolutely do not want my two young sons someday exposed to this satanic devotional or prayer or witchcraft or Branch Davidian prayers in my hometown of central Texas," he said.

Panel participants also were skeptical of the measure's provision allowing people to recognize religious beliefs, heritage or traditions on public property.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the measure has "bad intended consequences and bad unintended consequences."

He said it could allow governments to recognize their heritage by declaring an official religion. "In Utah, the 'people' could vote to declare the state officially Mormon. And in Alabama, the 'people' could have a referendum to declare the state to be a Christian state."

Lynn held a sign that read: "Welcome to Alabama. This is a Christian state." He said it could become a road sign under the Istook measure.

Witnesses also took issue with a provision in the amendment that would bar government from denying a "benefit" on account of religion.

Rep. Sanford Bishop, D-Ga., spoke in favor of the amendment but said he was not "wedded" to the Istook language. He said that politically it would be better if the "benefit" language were deleted. He also proposed that the amendment read "secure the people's right to religious liberty," instead of the right to "acknowledge God."

Church-state experts say the "benefit" provision would allow voucher plans providing tax dollars for parochial school education.

Nadler warned that opening the door for funds to go to religious groups would lead to "sectarian battles" over government appropriations every year.

"Government could never equally fund all religions even if it wanted to," Davis said. "Religions with less political clout would be denied their share of the pie."

Timothy McDonald, senior pastor of Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta, predicted the measure would create conflict between religions. "Instead of religion helping to bring us together, religious conflict would drive us apart," he said.

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'Reagan Revolution' did not alter Supreme Court, conservative says

By Mark Wingfield

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. (ABP) -- The "Reagan Revolution" that many conservative Christians believed would change the way the United States Supreme Court treats people of faith "did not materialize," admits a key Religious Right figure.

John Whitehead, an attorney and president of the Rutherford Institute, wrote in the August issue of Jerry Falwell's National Liberty Journal that Ronald Reagan and George Bush appointees to the Supreme Court have dashed the hopes of conservative Christians.

"It is now apparent that 12 years of conservative presidents did nothing to change the judiciary's 'progressive' course," Whitehead noted. "In 1980, conservatives heralded the election of Ronald Reagan as the dawn of a new era. Popular wisdom predicted Reagan would appoint conservative justices, and soon the tide of liberal decisions would begin to turn."

Five of the court's nine current justices were appointed by Reagan or Bush, his vice president and successor, Whitehead noted. Given this majority, conservatives believed "the courts would deliver a string of decisions reasserting the rights of religious persons in America's public arena and a respect for the value of human life."

But the revolution "did not materialize," he said.

Whitehead cited a cluster of major Supreme Court decisions released in June as final evidence that the expected revolution hasn't happened and won't.

Specifically, he criticized the court for overturning the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which guaranteed government could not burden the free exercise of religion without good cause, and the Communications Decency Act, which would have banned indecent images from the Internet.

Rather than aiding people of faith, the Reagan-Bush court "has actually provided new rationales for excluding religion and religious belief from public life," Whitehead said.

"The underlying message in this labyrinth of decisions is clear: the Supreme Court will not revive American society. It will not lead religious people, unborn children and concerned parents into a bright new millennium. It will not fulfill any 'conservative' dream," he said.

The only remedy, given the failure of the hoped-for judicial revolution, Whitehead suggested, is "grassroots organizations battling at the lowest levels of the court system."

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To encourage church visitors, give them a sign, pastor says

By David Winfrey

TOLEDO, Ohio (ABP) -- People who are looking for a sign from God might benefit from a sign from church, says one pastor.

Message signs can help churches make a great first impression, but they involve planning and discipline, wrote David Claassen in the August issue of Net Results, a newsletter offering ideas for church leadership.

"A well-designed church sign is a major investment but worth the cost if wisely utilized," wrote Claassen, pastor of Mayfair-Plymouth Congregational church in Toledo, Ohio.

He suggested targeting sign messages to a wider audience than just church members.

"In most situations more nonattenders than attenders will see the sign," he wrote. "Use the Sunday bulletin, the church newsletter, announcement time in worship and in-house bulletin boards to communicate with parishioners. Use the church sign to communicate with nonattenders."

Other issues to consider for buying or using a message sign, Claassen wrote, include:

-- Placement. New signs must meet community zoning and placement requirements. Signs should be easily seen from the road while close enough to the church building to be associated with the church. If a sign has two sides facing opposite flows of traffic, Claassen recommended using different messages on each side because commuters will pass both ways going to and from work.

-- Lighting. Timers or photoelectric cells can prevent wasted electricity and make sure the sign is lighted during winter's dawn and dusk drive times.

-- Lettering. "Two common mistakes: lettering that is too small and trying to cram too much information on the sign," he wrote. Claassen suggested gauging the length of messages to the speed of passing traffic so they are readable in the time it takes to drive by.

-- Procedures. Claassen recommended getting one person who is responsible for changing the sign on a regular basis, preferably weekly. A regular diet of inspirational messages make an occasional church activity advertisement more effective, he added. "People find more attractive the signs that give them something rather than signs that ask for a response."

Some of the best ideas for messages can come from personal reading, Claassen wrote. He recommended jotting down phrases while reading. They can be shortened later to fit a sign's limited space.

"Our church leaders often hear people say they drive out of their way to see what is on our church sign," he stated. "Occasionally a visitor attends worship because some of the messages were especially meaningful."

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Judge who ruled against religious display influenced by Baptist's writings

By Kenny Byrd

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (ABP) -- Since ordering a fellow judge to stop pushing his religion in a courtroom, Montgomery County (Ala.) Circuit Judge Charles Price has received praise for courage and commitment to the law.

Price won the Kennedy family's prestigious Profile in Courage Award for ordering Etowah County Circuit Judge Roy Moore to halt his practices of opening court sessions with prayer and displaying a lone-wall replica of the Ten Commandments.

The award is named after President John F. Kennedy's Pulitzer-Prize winning book that showcased figures who stood for principle over popularity.

Price has been the target of threats and racist remarks since his ruling. Alabama Gov. Fob James has threatened to use state troops to prevent the enforcement of Price's ruling.

What drove this Sunday school teacher from Saint John's African-American Methodist Episcopal Church to stand for such a cause?

Price said it was his pledge to apply the law based on previous court decisions and legislative acts. "Never have I committed myself as a judge to make a decision based on popularity or political expediency."

In an interview, Price said a second driving force was the most important essay he ever read on the matter. In "The Rights of Conscience Inalienable," first published in 1791, Baptist minister John Leland wrote that the government "has no more to do with the religious opinions of men than it has with the principles of mathematics."

Price said he interpreted Leland's essay to mean that "every man should be able to live out his principles -- and that's what I try to do -- but government shouldn't be in there trying to force" religion on people. Price called it "a powerful essay written by a very religious man."

Price said he relied heavily in his ruling on a 1993 ruling in *Harvey vs. Cobb County, Ga.*, which barred the posting of the Ten Commandments in a courtroom unless the display is part of a larger display of nonreligious historical items.

Price said that his ruling does not bar Moore from hanging the Ten Commandments. "Judge Moore can hang the Ten Commandments, and my ruling says that," he said. "They just must be displayed with other historical judicial educational documents that show the development and evolution of law in this country. And he cannot hang them for pure political reasons or purposes."

He said he is not upset by people protesting his ruling. "I believe people should protest. I'm where I am out of protest."

Contrary to what his protesters believe, however, "my ruling guaranteed their religious freedom -- the religious freedom from public officials whether it be Judge Moore or Judge Price," he said.

Price said the Ten Commandments "are not in peril" since his ruling. "The Ten Commandments have been here since God gave them to Moses," he said. "How can you threaten the Ten Commandments? It's God's word."

In the interview, he said government sponsorship of religion is alright when "it's your religion, but tomorrow it will be somebody else's religion and then we're going to have problems."

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