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Alabama residents oppose Disney boycott, poll says

By Bob Allen

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. (ABP) -- A third of people in an Alabama survey said they agree with a Southern Baptist boycott of the Disney Co., but nearly half of boycott supporters said they have taken no steps to implement it.

According to the survey by Southern Opinion Research in Tuscaloosa, Ala., about 57 percent of Alabama citizens said they disagree with a decision by the Southern Baptist Convention to urge its members to boycott Disney and its products.

Among those who described their religious affiliation as Baptist, more than half (52 percent) said they disagree with the boycott, 40 percent said they agree and 8 percent had no opinion.

Of the 33 percent of Alabama citizens who said they agree with the boycott, 43 percent said they have taken steps to avoid Disney products, while 47 percent said they had not.

About 10 percent did not express an opinion on the issue.

The statewide survey of 407 adults was conducted Aug. 5-9, seven weeks after the SBC adopted a resolution urging its 15.6 million church members to "refrain from patronizing" Disney and its subsidiaries. The boycott protests company policies which critics say erode family values, including employment benefits for homosexuals.

White Baptists were evenly split on the boycott, with 45 percent favoring and 46 percent opposing it. Ten percent did not have an opinion. Black Baptists, meanwhile, overwhelmingly disagreed with the boycott, with 71 percent against and 24 percent for.

Among non-Baptists, 28 percent agreed with the boycott, 62 percent disagreed and 11 percent did not offer an opinion.

Among both Baptists and non-Baptists who support the idea of a boycott, 43 percent said they had personally taken steps to avoid the Disney Co. or its products, while 48 percent of Baptists and 44 percent of other religions said they had not.

The boycott was more effective among groups more likely to spend money on Disney, younger adults with higher incomes. About half (51 percent) of respondents aged 18-40 who agree with the boycott said they had avoided a Disney product, compared to 37 percent who had not. The percentages dropped to 44 percent yes and 51 percent no for those ages 41-60 and 19 percent yes and 62 percent no for those over 60.

Among respondents with annual incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000, 53 percent of boycott supporters said they had refrained from spending money on Disney and 34 percent said they had not. For those earning more than \$50,000, 57 percent said they had taken steps to avoid Disney, 41 percent had not.

Those earning less than \$30,000 were least likely to have altered their spending habits because of the boycott: 29 percent said they had and 55 percent had not.

Support for the boycott ran stronger among those with higher religious commitment. Among those who said religion is very important in their life, 41 percent agreed with the boycott and 48 percent disagreed. For those who said religion is important, not very important or not-at-all important, 18 percent agree with the boycott and 74 percent disagree.

The strongest factor in support for the boycott was church attendance. Among Alabamians who attend church five or more times a month, 58 percent said they agree with the boycott and 34 percent were against it. For those who do not attend at least once a month, 16 percent supported the boycott and 76 percent disagreed.

The survey's sample was reported to be accurate within 5 percent. That means if all registered Alabama voters were polled, it is 95 percent likely their responses would vary by no more than 5 percent from the survey results.

Sampling error does not reflect the influence of other factors that can affect outcome, such as question wording, question order or interviewer effect.

Jim Stovall, co-director of Southern Opinion Research, said while Alabama has the reputation of being a conservative state, his experience with political polling would lead him to expect a similar response in other states.

Stovall did acknowledge "an inordinate number of Baptists here," which could skew the results in favor of the boycott.

About 1 million of Alabama's 4 million residents are Southern Baptists, according to a comparison of denominational statistics with census information. Nationwide, about one person in 15 is a member of a Southern Baptist church.

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Teen spirituality high, but commitment low

By David Winfrey

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- The spiritual beliefs of America's early teenagers closely mirror those of adults, although youth rarely talk to their parents about such matters, a Christian researcher recently reported.

George Barna reported that 88 percent of teens say they're Christian, slightly higher than the 84 percent of adults who define themselves as Christian. But responses indicate many youth are identifying more with a cultural Christianity than with the Bible.

Teens and adults also responded similarly that religious faith is very important to their lives, 82 percent and 87 percent respectively.

"In many ways, teenagers are the mirror image of adults when it comes to religious beliefs and attitudes," Barna wrote in his newsletter, the "Barna Report."

"This is particularly striking because we also discovered that teens and their parents spend little if any time discussing what they believe related to faith."

Barna said teens absorb much of their religious perspective through "spiritual osmosis," a mixture of observation, conversation, instructions, media exposure, family tradition and peer pressure.

Meanwhile, commitment levels by those who call themselves Christians is low, Barna wrote.

Of those who call themselves Christian, only 35 percent said they are "absolutely committed" to the Christian faith." And about one-quarter of all teens said their faith makes a "huge difference" in how they live.

Biblical literacy was lacking among many teens polled. While 64 percent said the Bible is totally accurate in all of its teachings, 51 percent said all people will experience the same outcome after death, regardless of their spiritual beliefs.

"The theology presently embraced by teens is still in transition, but it leans heavily toward a cultural Christianity rather than a biblical Christianity," he wrote.

Two-thirds of teens believe in the God described in the Bible, but one-third believe in another notion of God, Barna wrote. Among the responses:

-- 11 percent said God is a "state of higher consciousness."

-- 9 percent called God the "total realization of all personal, human potential."

-- 7 percent said there are many gods, each with its own power and authority.

Barna noted that while most teens refer to themselves as Christians, only 32 percent answered questions about their faith in ways that indicate they've had a "born-again" experience.

"Also, it appears that age 15 is a major time of questioning prior assumptions about core faith elements," Barna wrote.

Even those who commit to Christ earlier re-evaluate that commitment at age 15, he wrote. "It is one of the last major windows of opportunity we have to influence people with the good news about Christ."

Jewell Nelson, a Sunday school associate for the Kentucky Baptist Convention, said to achieve better educated and committed teens, parents and churches should start early.

"We don't need to start with youth. We need to start with preschool," she said. "Good age-appropriate Bible teaching in the preschool and children's ministries builds a strong spiritual foundation for youth."

Children ages nine through 12 are especially open to biblical answers to spiritual questions, she said. "These are the ages when concrete thinking lessens and reasoning increases.

"If good teaching begins here, teen years are more secure, though questioning and re-evaluating can be a significant part of faith development and growth."

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Measure would protect workers' religious practice

By Andrew Black

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A measure recently introduced in the U.S. Senate promising greater accommodation for the religious practices of workers has gained new momentum since President Clinton released guidelines to protect religious expression in the federal workplace.

A spokeswoman for Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., sponsor of the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, said Clinton's actions will help lawmakers highlight the issue of protecting workers' religious practices.

Mike McCurry, White House press secretary, said Clinton has not taken a position on the act introduced July 31 in the Senate.

Clinton released guidelines Aug. 14 instructing federal agency heads to accommodate the religious expression and practice of workers unless it would create the appearance of endorsing religion or if it unduly impeded the work of the agency.

Proponents of the Senate measure, co-sponsored by Sen. Dan Coats, R-Ind., said the workplace religious freedom measure is needed to eliminate discrimination against religious observances in the private and public sector.

"Though we know that only a small minority of employers refuse to make reasonable accommodations for employees to observe the Sabbath or other holy days, the fact of the matter is that no worker in America should be forced to choose between a job and deeply held religious beliefs," said Coats.

The proposal would require employers to accommodate employees' religious observances except in cases causing "significant difficulty or expense." The exception is modeled after language used in the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Current law requires employers to provide reasonable accommodation for an employee's religious observance unless doing so would create "undue hardship" for the employer. Religious-liberty advocates say broad judicial interpretation of undue hardship leaves little protection for workers.

Richard Foltin, legislative director and legal counsel for the American Jewish Committee, said that under current judicial interpretation, "the religiously observant worker is faced with a situation in which employers are allowed, and in some cases even required, to grossly disregard the religious obligations of employees."

Employers can deny accommodation for religious observance if doing so would damage morale, harm the employer's image or create a technical violation of seniority rules, Foltin said.

In one instance, a Sikh was denied promotion to a managerial position at a restaurant because he would not shave his beard -- a practice forbidden by his religious beliefs. A federal district court ruled that "relaxation" of the restaurant's grooming standards would harm the establishment's attempt to portray a "clean-cut" image, as well as create problems for enforcing the policy on other employees.

The bill was introduced in the previous session of Congress by Kerry and Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y. According to a spokesman, Nadler plans to reintroduce the bill in the House later this fall.

The Workplace Religious Freedom Act is supported by several religious groups including the American Jewish Committee, Baptist Joint Committee, Christian Legal Society, National Association of Evangelicals, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

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-- Andrew Black is an intern at the Baptist Joint Committee

Church, Texas city reach agreement in dispute over building permit

By Kenny Byrd

BOERNE, Texas (ABP) -- An Aug. 12 settlement in a dispute pitting a Texas town's interest in preserving a historic district against a church's desire to expand its worship space is "terrible" for the church, says a lawyer who argued the case before the U.S. Supreme Court.

St. Peter Roman Catholic Church and the city of Boerne, Texas, agreed to settle the dispute two months after the Supreme Court ruling which struck down the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

The church had argued the city lacked the "compelling interest" required by the law to deny a building permit. In deciding the case in the city's favor, the Supreme Court ruled RFRA unconstitutional, saying Congress overstepped its authority in enacting the law.

Originally, the church wanted to raze its sanctuary, made up of two buildings from 1870 and 1923, to accommodate its growing congregation. The city refused a building permit, because the church is located in the city's historic district.

Under framework of the settlement, which still leaves details to be worked out by architects from both parties, the church must take steps to restore several historical details of its buildings in exchange for a permit to build a larger sanctuary.

Tom Drought, general counsel for the Archdiocese of San Antonio, said it will cost the church about \$500,000 to meet terms of the agreement. He said the church is satisfied with the settlement, however, because it ends a three-year court battle and allows the addition of needed worship space.

Douglas Laycock, who argued the church's case supporting RFRA before the Supreme Court, called the settlement "terrible" and said under the plan, the church "will be paying debts on this forever."

"Taking RFRA away has real consequences and this is an example," Laycock said. "It has moved the bargaining leverage from the church to the city."

Laycock said the settlement will "divert huge amounts of money from religious to secular purposes" and shows the city thinks its "tourist business is a lot more important than protecting religious exercise."

"We all lost when we lost RFRA," Drought said. "The whole thing is a burden on the protection of religion."

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Louisville pastor's book offers practical ethics for ministers

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- For all their theological training, ministers often emerge from seminaries unprepared for the practical aspects of their job, according to a Baptist pastor who has written a book on ministerial ethics.

Ron Sisk, pastor of Crescent Hill Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., said his book, "Surviving Ministry," is designed to help pastors and others develop ministerial ethics based on Scripture and Baptist principles.

"For most ministers, the real issues have to do with, 'How do I take care of my family life and still be in the ministry?' 'How do I deal ethically when I'm negotiating with a prospective church?' 'How do I work out my own leadership of a congregation?'" he said.

Sisk said he was particularly satisfied with a section on balancing professional and family time. "I felt good about giving ministers permission to take adequate time for themselves and their families."

Another topic addresses matters of authority. "We have a strong authoritarian movement among many pastors today," he said. "Biblically it's difficult to find much justification."

Sisk said ministers must earn authority by following Christ's model of servanthood. "It is something which is given by others, not something which is a right of office," he said. "The model of Jesus is, 'The one who would be first among you should be servant of all.'"

Sisk said some seminaries are getting better at helping students with the practical issues related to their future jobs, but "it's pretty erratic."

"Translating academics into practical usefulness has never been easy and never will be," he said. "It's the difference between teaching a surgeon how to do an appendectomy and the surgeon confronted with his first inflamed appendix. Sooner or later, you have to do it yourself."

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-- Western Recorder

Lyons asks forgiveness for 'judgment' errors

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Plagued by an escalating scandal, National Baptist leader Henry Lyons asked worshippers in Jacksonville, Fla., to forgive him for "errors in judgment."

Speaking at a citywide revival Aug. 20, Lyons said he meant no harm in errors of judgment. "But I come here to ask you tonight to forgive me," Lyons told the revival group at St. Thomas Baptist Church. Worshippers responded with enthusiastic cheering, according to a report in the Florida Times-Union.

A scandal over Lyons' leadership of the 8.5 million-member National Baptist Convention USA erupted in July after his wife was arrested for allegedly trying to burn down a \$700,000 home he owned with another woman in an exclusive St. Petersburg neighborhood.

In the weeks since, various reports have raised questions about his lifestyle and use of convention funds. Several African-American leaders have called for his resignation to head off controversy at the convention's upcoming annual meeting.

In his first media interview since the scandal, Lyons told an African-American paper in Tampa he was a victim of media attacks and racism.

Lyons acknowledged he made errors. "But I was never a diamond-wearing, woman-chasing pimp," he told the biweekly Florida Sentinel Bulletin.

He said he and Bernice Edwards, a convicted embezzler whom he hired as the convention's public relations director, "are very good friends but have never been lovers."

He said he bought the house with her as a "business transaction," explaining she had the money but not a good enough credit rating. He said he did not know why wording on the credit application had been changed from "married" to "single." He said he initialed other changes but not that one.

"This character assassination is all about race," he said.

Meanwhile, the St. Petersburg Times surfaced a new charge Aug. 19 that Lyons made a \$2,500 contribution with convention funds for a fund-raiser with first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. Federal law prohibits political contributions from religious organizations.

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-- By ABP staff

EBF protests arrest of Azerbaijani pastor

HAMBURG, Germany (ABP) -- The arrest of a Baptist pastor and deacon in Azerbaijan has prompted a protest letter from a European Baptist leader to the president of the former Soviet republic.

Karl Heinz Walter, general secretary of the European Baptist Federation, protested the reported arrest of Pastor Zaur Balaev and a deacon from Aliabad Baptist Church in a letter to Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliev.

The church leaders reportedly were imprisoned over their ties to the Baptist church. It was the second time Baptists had been arrested in the city, a Shi'ite Muslim stronghold. In his letter, Walter called the arrest a violation of human rights.

"We can assure you that the members of Baptist churches have always been faithful citizens of the countries where they live but at the same time have insisted on religious freedom for every person," Walter wrote.

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-- European Baptist Press Service

Missionary work slowly resuming in Albania

TIRANA, Albania (ABP) -- Missionary work is slowly resuming in Albania, where a civil war forced the departure of non-Albanian Christian workers in March.

According to European Baptist Press Service, several British Baptist missionaries have returned to Albania.

Two representatives of the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board are back in Albania: Lawrence Duhon in Tirana and Suzanne Lacy in Elbason, according to Sue Gray, spokeswoman for the IMB's Eastern-Central Europe office in Wiesbaden.

Cooperative Baptist Fellowship representative Mary Ida Buzhardt has returned to Tirana, said CBF representative Becky Smith in Berlin. The Atlanta-based Fellowship is waiting for further evaluation of field conditions before couples with children may return, she said.

Eighteen SBC and nine CBF missionaries fled Albania in March as an armed rebellion overtook Tirana, the capital city. One fleeing CBF missionary was hit by a stray bullet but was not seriously injured.

European Baptist leaders will meet Sept. 3-7 in Tirana to discuss the future of Baptist work in Albania. According to an earlier timetable, direct European involvement was to be curtailed this fall as Albanian Baptists gradually moved into leadership positions.

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-- European Baptist Press Service

Record 20 students graduate lay academy

BUDAPEST, Hungary (ABP) -- A record 20 students graduated this summer from the International Baptist Lay Academy in Budapest, Hungary.

The academy, a European Baptist Federation institution, offers theological training and English lessons to adult lay leaders of Baptist churches in central and eastern Europe.

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-- European Baptist Press Service

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