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Most Southern Baptists oppose Disney boycott, survey says

By Bob Allen and Greg Warner

JACKSON, Miss. (ABP) -- Less than a third of Baptists -- including Southern Baptists -- agree with the Southern Baptist Convention's boycott of The Disney Co., according to a recent survey.

Of those Baptists who support the boycott, about half (48.8 percent) have avoided buying Disney products, the survey found.

Researchers interviewed 610 randomly-selected adults representing a variety of Baptist groups and theological viewpoints. Only those Baptists who described themselves as "fundamentalists" voiced more support than opposition to the boycott -- 45 percent to 43 percent, with 7 percent not expressing an opinion.

The scientific survey is the broadest study yet to gauge reaction to the Disney boycott. Conducted by Southern Research Group of Jackson, Miss., for Associated Baptist Press, the telephone survey interviewed Baptists in the 14-state Southeastern region of the United States, where most of the 16 million Southern Baptists live.

The Disney boycott, approved by messengers attending the Southern Baptist Convention last June, is intended to pressure Disney to reverse policies that critics say benefit homosexuals and detract from the company's traditional pro-family image. The boycott resolution, which passed overwhelmingly, urged Baptists to "refrain from patronizing" movies, theme parks and merchandise outlets from Disney and more than 200 subsidiaries.

Support for the boycott was weak in almost all groups surveyed.

Among those Baptists who said the Southern Baptist Convention best represents their point of view, 14.3 percent said they agree with the boycott and 15.8 percent strongly agree. But 26.7 percent said they disagreed with the boycott and 28.2 percent said they strongly disagreed.

Respondents who said their point of view is best represented by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group, opposed the boycott even more often, with 81 percent against and 8 percent in favor.

The study also assessed support for the boycott according to theological positions, with more conservative respondents showing more support.

Of those of who described themselves as "fundamentalists," 45 percent disagreed with the boycott, while 43 percent agreed. Among self-described "conservatives," 50 percent disagreed and 37 percent supported the boycott.

Among "moderates," 82 percent said they opposed the boycott, while 10 percent were for it. Those who described themselves as "liberal" opposed the boycott, 83 percent against and 5 percent for.

The findings of the ABP survey paralleled those of an earlier study of Alabama residents. An August study by Southern Opinion Research of Tuscaloosa, Ala., found 57 percent of Alabama residents disagreed with the boycott, while 33 percent of the state's residents supported the boycott call. Among those in the Alabama survey who identified themselves as Baptists, 52 percent said they disagreed with the boycott, while 40 percent supported it.

In an unscientific call-in poll sponsored by USA Weekend magazine this summer, an unusually high 107,000 readers who responded split nearly down the middle on the boycott. Just over half (50.5 percent) said they oppose the boycott, while 49.5 percent said they were in favor of boycotting Disney.

The SBC resolution that launched the boycott accuses Disney of "increasingly promoting immoral ideologies." Among offenses criticized by the Southern Baptists 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.

Also targeted is the Disney-owned ABC network, which introduced television's first lesbian leading character in an April airing of the sitcom "Ellen."

Recently, Disney critics have focused their attention on "Nothing Sacred," a controversial new show on ABC-TV. Reviewers have given the program high marks, but some religious groups have criticized its portrayal of a young, nonconformist priest in an inner-city parish. Several of the programs sponsors have pulled out in response to criticism of the show.

Richard Land, head of the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission called the program "another egregious example of Disney's Christian-bashing agenda."

The Southern Baptist Convention joined the boycott, initiated in 1995 by Donald Wildmon's American Family Association, in June. Others who have joined the boycott movement include the 1.3 million-member Assemblies of God, the Prison Fellowship's Charles Colson, Concerned Women for America and James Dobson of Focus on the Family.

Disney stock dropped nearly 10 percent in the weeks immediately following the SBC boycott, to \$77.0625 a share. By Oct. 13, however, the price had rebounded to \$84.625 -- 75 cents below a 52-week high set May 12.

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Southern Seminary to open undergraduate Bible college

By David Winfrey

LOUISVILLE, Ky. -- Southern Baptist Theological Seminary will transform its Boyce Bible School into a Bible college offering a bachelor's degree in biblical studies starting next fall.

Seminary trustees approved the proposal in a voice vote with no opposition during their fall meeting Oct. 13-14.

The plan drew mixed responses from Kentucky Baptist leaders. Some questioned whether the new program would compete with existing schools.

Plans call for Boyce Bible School to be renamed the James P. Boyce College of the Bible, after the seminary's founding president.

Currently, Boyce Bible School offers a two-year associate's degree and Campbellsville University works with the seminary to offer a bachelor of arts in Christian studies on the seminary campus.

The new degree would specifically target students seeking training for ministry in a church, said Danny Akin, vice president for academic administration.

"This is a niche degree for those who already sense God's call to full-time ministry," said Akin, who added that some students want all four years of their undergraduate careers to be focused on Bible studies. "We can do that now."

A preliminary curriculum is divided into four categories of study: theology, Bible, ministry and general, which includes classes on English, "great books" and computer science.

Akin will begin looking to hire a dean for the college, which soon will begin accepting applications for next fall, according to information distributed to trustees.

Seminary President Albert Mohler said the concept furthers the desire of James Boyce that Southern would accept and train ministers who had no undergraduate education.

"This is a distinctly Baptist vision of theological education, for it recognizes that our churches and ministers require differing levels of study and education," Mohler said.

While Mohler said Southern's on-campus Bible college will be the first Southern Baptist program of its kind, at least two other seminaries already offer bachelor's degrees through on-campus colleges.

The New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary College of Undergraduate Studies began in 1992, said Debbie Moore of the seminary's news office.

Students at the Louisiana school can pursue four years of education for either a bachelor of arts or a bachelor of general studies, with specialization in pastoral ministry, Christian education or music, she said.

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., offers a bachelor of arts degree in biblical studies through its two-year Southern Baptist Theological College.

Students must have 58 hours of prerequisite classes before they enter the senior college, said Lee Weeks of the seminary's news and information office.

Southeastern's college began in 1995 with 100 students, Weeks said. Enrollment doubled last year and is up again this year, he said.

That school also offers an associate's degree, but it is limited to students age 30 and older, Weeks said.

A distinction between the Boyce program and the other two seminaries is the age at which students can enroll.

Boyce will accept students as young as 18. The prerequisite courses required for Southeastern's program means most students are at least age 20 before entering, and New Orleans Seminary requires undergraduate students be at least 21.

In material presented to trustees, Southern officials said they don't expect their college to compete with liberal arts colleges sponsored by Baptist state conventions. "The very tight focus on biblical studies for ministry is the unique hallmark of the Boyce College of the Bible," the material stated.

But Kentucky Baptist Convention President Floyd Price called the new Boyce college further evidence of eroding trust between the national Baptist agencies and state Baptist agencies.

"This appears to be one more break in the tie that used to bind us," said Price, pastor of Scottsville Baptist Church. "Why are we competing with ourselves? We have three colleges and one Bible college in Kentucky. Why does Southern wish to do this rather than recruit out of the other institutions. Is this a move to dominate?"

Price noted that until recently colleges, Bible colleges and seminaries hadn't offered degrees available at other types of institutions.

"The bottom line is the trend moves us toward a diminishing of cooperation," he said. "I don't think it's healthy, but I think it's the way we're going."

Officials at Campbellsville, which has offered a bachelor's degree at Southern for several years, declined to comment.

"Until we ... have had communications with officials at Southern Seminary, any comment from us concerning the new Boyce College of the Bible would be premature," said Marc Whitt, vice president for advancement at Campbellsville.

Enrollment has grown gradually for the Campbellsville program, and currently is up to 40, Whitt said.

Seminary leaders said they hope the Campbellsville program will continue on campus.

"So far as we are concerned, the Boyce-Campbellsville partnership leading to the B.A. should continue," seminary leaders said in material distributed to trustees. "This offers an excellent means of gaining a liberal arts B.A. for those who wish to pursue that option."

Boyce College of the Bible would be the third Baptist Bible college in Kentucky. Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College in Mayfield is a joint-venture of 11 Baptist associations in western Kentucky and surrounding states. Clear Creek Baptist Bible College in Pineville is supported by the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

Regarding Clear Creek, Akin said, "We want to say that we are here not to compete but to complement."

Southern would not expect to draw students from Clear Creek's traditional base in Appalachia, he said. "We'll draw from other areas geographically."

Clear Creek President Bill Whittaker said he's happy any time someone is being trained for the ministry, but added Boyce could attract students who might otherwise attend Clear Creek.

"This will affect us some because we are pulling from the same area," he said, noting that Clear Creek currently has students from 18 states, including Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee and Indiana. The school has a current enrollment of 159, up 12 percent from last year.

Regarding the target audience of ministers, he added: "This is the same kind of student we've been seeking since 1926."

Whittaker noted that Southern Baptist seminaries traditionally have limited themselves to graduate-level study, but added many Baptist colleges now offer theological training that competes with seminaries.

The Boyce College will be housed in the Carver Hall complex on the west end of the seminary's campus. Upgrading and renovation projects are scheduled to be completed by next summer.

In other matters, Seminary trustees approved the formation of a task force of trustees and faculty to study tenure tracks for professors. Akin will chair that group.

Trustees learned that Harold Best has been hired to teach as a senior professor in the seminary's school of church music and worship. Best, a non-Baptist, will teach at the seminary through Dec. 31, 1999.

Lloyd Mims, dean of the music school, said Best is well-known to Baptists, having led worship seminars for the Sunday School Board for five years. "He is known throughout the SBC and we are just ecstatic."

Board Chairman Jerry Johnson announced a charter-review committee will consider phasing down the number of seminary trustees from 65 to between 30 and 40. Meetings currently cost \$3,000-\$5,000 annually per trustee, and the board is almost double the size of any other seminary's, he noted.

Dennis Williams, dean of the school of Christian education and leadership, told trustees the school is pursuing offering two new doctoral degrees.

A doctor of education in leadership degree could be offered as early as February, pending approval by the Association of Theological Schools

The other, doctor of education ministries, could take as long as a year to gain approval because it is a new degree, Williams said.

Seminary officials also dedicated the school's new \$3.57 million Chiles Conference facility and dining hall.

Reports on technology, growth top Golden Gate Seminary trustee meeting

By Mark Wyatt

VANCOUVER, Wash. (ABP) -- Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary could become the first school in the nation to offer a master of theology degree via the Internet under plans approved by seminary trustees Oct. 14.

In a related action, trustees redesignated nearly \$1 million in capital improvement funds from 1995-96 and 1996-97 Cooperative Program gifts to pay for a number of projects including several technological improvements needed to offer the on-line degree program.

"Essentially it means we are going to be radically improving our computer technology," explained Gary Gober, a trustee from Nashville, Tenn. Gober said the seminary will be "upgrading from virtually nothing" and replacing a "rag-tag system" of computers with a network of modern hardware and software.

Pending approval by the seminary's accrediting agencies, the master of theology on the Internet will begin as a three-year pilot program in the fall of 1998. Designed to be completed in two to four years, the degree program will consist of courses totalling 28 semester hours, a thesis and weekly on-line dialogues among students and faculty on selected seminar topics.

"Nobody else is doing this," declared Rick Durst, vice president for academic affairs. In response to a trustee question, Durst said students enrolling in the Internet degree program must satisfy normal application requirements and attend an orientation seminar on the seminary's main campus in Mill Valley, Calif.

The \$950,871 trustee redesignated for capital improvements was made possible because Cooperative Program gifts from Southern Baptist churches exceeded budget expectations. In addition to funding the computer upgrades the money will enable the seminary to begin making its library electronically accessible.

Seminary President William Crews said computerizing library resources will strengthen work at the seminary's regional campuses, such as the Pacific Northwest Campus in Vancouver, Wash., where trustees held their regular fall meeting.

It was the trustees' first meeting at that campus since completion this year of the Northwest Baptist Center which houses the seminary's regional operations as well as ministry offices of the Northwest Baptist Convention and the Northwest Baptist Foundation. Crews told trustees the seminary's partnership with the Northwest Baptist Convention is the subject of ongoing negotiations on a "memorandum of understanding" between the two entities concerning use of the new facilities.

At issue is a \$500,000 gift the seminary made several years ago to help build the Northwest Baptist Center. Crews said he hopes the Northwest Baptist Convention will agree on proposed language that guarantees the seminary would get back up to 75 percent of that amount if the building is sold or the partnership dissolved within five years.

"We don't expect that to happen. I expect the partnership to continue until Jesus comes," Crews assured trustees. Ratifying the refund clause, however, will ensure that "whoever occupies these chairs 15 years from now will have something in writing instead of the handshake we've had," he added.

Jeff Iorg, executive director of the Northwest Baptist Convention, commented on the memorandum of understanding during a dinner with seminary trustees. "It is an interesting process to put down on paper how we're going to work together," he said. "We have worked together relationally so long that it's hard to distill it into a single document.

"We are grateful for the \$500,000 gift Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary gave us," Iorg continued. "But don't forget that Northwest Baptists have contributed and will contribute \$3.5 million more to get the job done," he added.

Crews noted that under a sliding scale proposed for the pact no refund would be required if the partnership endures at least 20 years. "We feel like we would have gotten our money's worth out of it," he explained.

Trustees voted to honor the donors of a \$5.2 million dollar gift to the seminary by naming Golden Gate's new school of intercultural studies after them. "The David and Faith Kim School of Intercultural Studies" will be dedicated next year.

According to seminary officials, nearly half of the current semester's enrollment growth at the Mill Valley campus has been from students enrolling in the intercultural studies program.

Preliminary enrollment figures for the fall semester show 1,649 students enrolled at Golden Gate Seminary, an increase of 3.7 percent compared to a year ago. Crews told trustees the number of new students this fall is 65 percent greater than a year ago. Each of the seminary's five campuses reports an increase in the number of new students, ranging from 9 percent in Brea, Calif., to 73 percent in Mill Valley. New student increases totalling 20 percent were reported at both the Pacific Northwest and Arizona campuses.

Golden Gate's newest campus, located in Denver, Colo., currently has 17 students enrolled in degree programs.

Increased enrollment also is reported at the seminary's Dixon School of Church Music, which trustees voted to close earlier this year. The action later was reversed in favor of restructuring the school and reducing its full-time faculty by one-half to stem mounting financial losses. That led to the resignations of music professors Craig and Beth Singleton but apparently did not hurt enrollment, as some had feared.

"I'm thankful that we didn't lose any students," Gary McCoy, director of the Dixon School of Church Music, told trustees at the Vancouver meeting. "No one left and we have seven new students."

McCoy also reported the music school has already taken in more than half of its budgeted income for the current academic year. Trustees greeted the news with applause.

In other business trustees:

- Approved an agreement with the Bonn Bible Seminary to offer the Master of Arts in Intercultural Studies degree in Bonn, Germany.

- Learned that seminary assets increased by more than \$1 million during the past year, primarily due to the sale of the last remaining parcel in a development project involving surplus land at the Mill Valley campus.

- Voted to comply with a request from the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee by revising the GGBTS charter to name the SBC as the sole "member" of the seminary's corporation.

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High court declines to review Oregon 'right-to-die' measure

By Andrew Black

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Following its own advice that the debate over physician-assisted suicide should continue, the Supreme Court declined Oct. 14 to hear a challenge to an Oregon law that would allow mentally competent, terminally ill patients to obtain lethal drugs from doctors to end their lives.

Oregon's Death With Dignity Act is the first voter-approved initiative that attempts to legalize a limited form of physician-assisted suicide. Several states have implemented laws banning the practice. In a June 1997 decision, the high court upheld two such measures in New York and Washington state and refused to recognize a constitutional right to assisted suicide.

However, the court left open the possibility of state laws legalizing some forms of assisted suicide. Chief Justice William Rehnquist, writing for the court, concluded that "Americans are engaged in an earnest and profound debate about the morality, legality, and practicality of physician-assisted suicide. Our holding permits this debate to continue, as it should in a democratic society."

The Oregon law has yet to take effect because of court challenges. In November, state voters will consider a repeal of the initiative, which originally passed by a narrow margin.

If the repeal effort fails, adult patients with a confirmed terminal illness will be able to request lethal prescriptions. Patients would be required to take the drugs themselves; the law forbids doctors from ending a patient's life by lethal injection or other active forms of "euthanasia."

The law was challenged by two doctors and a terminally ill woman, who argued it could induce clinically depressed patients to commit suicide against their true intents.

In a decision the high court refused to review, an appeals court ruled that the law's challengers would not be harmed by the law and therefore could not challenge it.

The high court also rejected a dispute over a Pennsylvania court's involvement in an internal dispute of the Grand Fraternity Rosae Crucis, a secret religious society.

A group trying to regain control of the organization sued the society, hoping to legally acquire the rights to all Rosicrucian assets. To resolve the dispute, the court ordered a vote by all membership, in keeping with a state non-profit corporation statute.

The society claimed the vote was an unconstitutional interference with its internal, doctrinal and religious affairs. It argued that members were being asked to violate a central tenet of their religion by publicly announcing their membership in the fraternity and that the state court was trying to decide the "purely religious question" of its leadership.

The district court dismissed the complaint against the state court's actions in a decision affirmed by the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

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Texas prison hospitality house a case study in cooperation

ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- While criminals and their victims grab headlines, Baptists in Abilene, Texas, are preparing a ministry to the invisible victims of crime.

That ministry -- a hospitality house for families of prison inmates -- will also stand as a monument to the spirit of Baptists who cooperate at the grassroots level despite much publicized differences that have divided Southern Baptists.

The Abilene Hospitality House will include free use of 40 beds and cooking and laundry facilities for family members who visit inmates at the French Robertson and Middleton units of the Texas Department of Corrections.

A \$100,000 gift last year from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship "encouraged our committee, helped us get started on the project, and gave us credibility with foundations and donors," said Phil Christopher, pastor of First Baptist Church in Abilene and president of the hospitality house board of directors. More than \$300,000 in other gifts have come since from foundations, churches, individual donors and the Baptist General Convention of Texas

Support from people with differing views of Southern Baptist Convention and Fellowship causes, has not divided Baptists in the Abilene Baptist Association, Christopher said. "We're all here to minister to those who need it, the least of the least," he said. "These people are often shunned. They feel overwhelmed by crime. If we can help just one child with self esteem, if we can break the cycle of crime in his or her life, it will all be worth it."

Families, mostly young women with small children, travel far, usually by bus and with little or no money, to visit a husband or relative. An assistant warden recently found a woman and her baby stranded on the road in the heat, trying to make it to the prison. She had no money, not even enough to eat.

Christopher envisions the hospitality house standing as a silent sermon in plain view of inmates out working in the fields. He wants them to see it "as a sign of hope and as a tangible expression of the love of Christ and of the community of faith."

That's already begun to happen. A prison choir came to the ground breaking in September and sang, "Bless This House."

"I went up to thank them," Christopher said, "but they replied, 'We want to thank YOU. People in the prison know what you're doing and we're grateful.'"

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-- Marv Knox, Loretta Fulton and Robert O'Brien contributed to this story

Complete Gypsy Bible scheduled for next year

By Robert O'Brien

PARIS (ABP) -- A complete Bible in the Romani [Gypsy] language will roll off the presses sometime next year, completing a joint project of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionaries and the United Bible Societies in the United Kingdom.

"It will be the first authorized translation of the complete Romani Bible to appear, and it's the next logical step in the Scripture ministries of the Fellowship's Gypsy team, said "T" Thomas, CBF missionary based in Paris.

Printing of the complete Bible follows the first printing of a Romani New Testament in 1995, in a joint venture of Virginia Baptists, CBF and the UBS. That printing, funded by a \$13,000 gift from Virginia Baptists, helped pave the way for new ministry opportunities among 40 million Gypsy people scattered across several continents, Thomas said.

The United Bible Societies and CBF decided to move ahead with the publishing and distribution of a complete Bible as the initial printing of 3,300 copies of the New Testament began to run low.

Text will come from the only surviving copy of a Romani Old Testament housed at the University of Cambridge library.

The CBF Gypsy team projects that scanning the existing Old Testament into a computer can begin in November, Thomas said. "After that, it can be proofread and printed." Missionary Keith Holmes, a member of the CBF Gypsy team, has already experimented successfully with scanning some chapters.

"We initially thought that we would need to type this manually and volunteers from CBF South Carolina have already signed up to do the job." Thomas said "Now, by scanning it, we can save months in delays and also cut costs."

"Though few funds are currently allotted to this project, we feel that once the word is out interest will grow and the necessary resources will be found," Thomas said.

"This is another turning point in sharing the Gospel with the Gypsy people of the world. Now, when people ask, 'When can we have the rest of the Bible in our language?' we can say, 'Soon, very soon!'"

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