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## **Disney head responds to critics on '60 Minutes'**

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Accusations that the Walt Disney Co. bashes Christians or is pushing a pro-homosexual agenda are "nuts," Disney Chairman Michael Eisner said in a "60 Minutes" report scheduled to air Nov. 23.

In his first public comments on a boycott of Disney by the Southern Baptist Convention and other religious groups, Eisner said the protest has had no financial effect on the giant entertainment company, according to a press release from CBS News in New York.

The report also includes an interview with Richard Land, president of Southern Baptists' Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, who charged Disney with "pushing a Christian-bashing, family bashing, pro-homosexual agenda."

"That's ridiculous. We're not pushing any agenda," Eisner told correspondent Lesley Stahl in response to Land's charges.

"When somebody says Pocahontas is anti-Christian or anti-black or anti-Native American, I say inside deep down, 'They're nuts,'" Eisner said.

Eisner also responded to a statement by Land that the Pocahontas character should have been portrayed as a Christian.

"She didn't become a Christian in the legend until after our story ended," he said, adding that Pocahontas "is one of the most pro-social movies made in the 75 years of the history of the Disney Company."

Other objections lodged against Disney include the decision to continue airing the "Ellen" sitcom on the Disney-owned ABC Television Network after its star, Ellen DeGeneres, declared she was gay and that her character on the program would be gay as well.

"That was [DeGeneres'] choice and ABC's choice and I think it's been very well done," Eisner said. Eisner added that he wasn't offended by last season's controversial same-sex kiss on "Ellen" but recognized it probably made some people uncomfortable. The decision to put a parental advisory on the episode was not in response to the Baptist boycott, he said.

Eisner said the boycott last June prompted him to finally respond to Disney critics on national television. "It hasn't had a financial effect," however, he added.

"I think [Disney is] the wrong group to go after," Eisner said. "But the one thing that's great about this country is they have the right to do it [protest] and they're doing it the right way."

"I love that. I respect that," he said.

Responding to criticism over allowing "Gay Day" at Disney theme parks, Eisner said Disney doesn't discriminate against anybody. "The homosexual organizations arranged that day themselves," Eisner said. "And I think it would be a travesty in this country for us to exclude anybody."

Asked by Stahl if he would sit down with Southern Baptist leaders to talk about the issues, Eisner replied, "I will meet with anybody at any time when it is presented in a rational and non-media-hyped way."

Also interviewed for the piece were Jim Henry, former SBC president and pastor of First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla., and a Southern Baptist family in Kissimmee, Fla., which is observing the boycott, according to a CBS press contact person.

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-- By Bob Allen

## **Baptist youth campers going to Disney World**

By Bob Allen

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Not all Baptists are boycotting The Walt Disney Co. this summer.

Passport, a national youth camping organization affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, is sponsoring two sessions of a pilot program called "Passport to Disney" at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla.

The camps, scheduled June 18-22 and June 23-27, will be in addition to regular Passport "Youth Camping with a Mission" programs at locations in Florida, North Carolina, Missouri and California, said David Burroughs, president of Passport, Inc., which is based in Louisville, Ky.

The Disney program will be a departure from the missions-action emphasis of regular Passport, Burroughs said. At a normal Passport camp, three hours of each day are spent in performing some sort of hands-on community-service project. Passport to Disney will focus more on education and less on action, Burroughs said, with teaching emphases on missions, Baptist principles and the environment.

Multi-million-dollar Disney facilities such as "The Hall of Presidents" at Disney's Magic Kingdom and "Living Seas Pavilion" at Epcot will be used "as a classroom for discovery," Burroughs said. Each day will also include free time for campers to enjoy the Disney theme parks.

Burroughs said conversations with Disney officials were already underway last June when the Southern Baptist Convention adopted its much-publicized boycott of The Disney Co. and more than 200 subsidiaries.

He said the boycott gave them pause, but after careful consideration the four-year-old Passport organization decided to move forward with the project.

Passport's regular camps already include a dance and use both males and females as camp pastors. Those practices tend to alienate more conservative Southern Baptists, and organizers did not expect much additional backlash from the more moderate groups likely to attend Passport in the first place, Burroughs said.

In addition, "We wanted to make the statement that there are some church groups who believe God's love is for everyone," he said.

The Southern Baptist Convention urged its 15.6 million members to "refrain from patronizing" Disney to protest company practices that critics say promote immorality. Frequently cited actions include granting domestic-

partner benefits to gay employees, the release of R-rated films by Disney subsidiaries, permitting "gay days" at theme parks and the "outing" of the television character "Ellen" on Disney-owned ABC.

Support for the boycott is mixed. According to a survey released in October, fewer than one in three Baptists nationwide said they support the boycott. Only those Baptists who described their theology as "fundamentalist" voiced more support than opposition to the boycott -- 45 percent to 43 percent.

Moderate Baptists strongly opposed the boycott. Among respondents who said their point of view is best represented by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, 81 percent checked in against the boycott and 8 percent in favor.

Passport is one of several independent partner organizations aligned with the Atlanta-based Fellowship. The Fellowship provides about 3 percent of Passport's annual budget, said Colleen Burroughs, who co-founded the camp with David, her husband. Offerings collected at Passport return about that much to the CBF, she said.

David Burroughs said Passport to Disney is not intended to protest or disobey the SBC boycott. He described a visit by Disney's youth-market team to a day of Passport last year to familiarize themselves with the program. In the beginning, "I don't think they were expecting much," Burroughs said, but by the end of the day some of the Disney workers rolled up their sleeves to pitch in at a Habitat-for-Humanity construction site.

During the day, a member of the marketing team was asked how the SBC boycott was affecting Disney. She replied, "Our problem at Disney is that we love everybody," Burroughs said.

"As we reflected later, we were sort of overwhelmed with that statement and thought, 'Shouldn't that be what Christians are known for?'" Burroughs said.

Registration for Passport opens Dec. 1, but news is already spreading about the Disney program.

Burroughs said the Passport office has been averaging two calls a day about the Disney program for about a month. Passport to Disney will accommodate about 225 youth per session, or a total of 450 spaces, he said.

Only one church so far has called to report it is supporting the boycott and express its disappointment that Passport would be patronizing Disney, Burroughs said.

Overall, in 11 weeks of camping this summer, officials expect more than 2,700 youth in grades 6-12 to attend Passport sessions this year, Burroughs said.

As Passport organizers worked with Disney, "We discovered a very active evangelical network of Christians who are employees of Walt Disney World, who are doing Bible studies, who are meeting for worship," Burroughs said. "We found it to be a very open and accepting place, and we fit in there."

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## **Leader in IMB's mission program resigns to start new organization**

By Robert Dilday

ARLINGTON, Texas (ABP) -- Michael Stroope, a key leader in the Southern Baptist International Mission Board's effort to share the Christian gospel with "unreached people groups," has resigned to start an independent ministry helping local congregations send missionaries abroad.

Joining Stroope, and his wife, Kay, in the new organization -- called All Peoples -- will be missionaries David and Mary Carpenter, who are resigning their positions as field workers in the IMB's Central and Southern Asia region. The Carpenters have been IMB missionaries since 1992.

Stroope, a 20-year veteran of the IMB, administered the board's Cooperative Services International -- a program to share the gospel with people in countries where a traditional missionary presence is not possible -- from 1992 until a staff reorganization in June.

Unlike the IMB, All Peoples "is not a [missionary] sending agency," Stroope said. Instead, the organization will assist churches to send out their own long-term missionary teams by offering support services in the United States and abroad.

Although All Peoples won't limit its geographic scope, Stroope said its focus will be "World A," that portion of the globe where people have little or no access to the Christian gospel and the region on which he concentrated during his two decades with the IMB. The area includes nations in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

"We'll help build awareness, consult with churches, train their missionaries, have people on the field to help those the church deploys, and provide services so that church-based teams can fulfill their mission," he said.

Stroope said the organization could eventually employ up to 20 people. For now, he will continue to live in Arlington, Texas, but it is uncertain where the agency will be permanently based, he said.

Funding for missionary teams will come from the supporting congregations. Staff members of All Peoples also will raise their own support from churches, although Stroope said some secretarial staff will likely draw salaries. Other funding will come from fees charged for training and instructional materials.

"What we've learned in the past 10 years is that the whole thing [sharing the Christian gospel] won't be done by 4,000 or 6,000 missionaries," said Stroope, 46. "We must mobilize the whole church. The money is there, the personnel are there, but this commission is no longer owned by the church. It's been given to a centralized board. The church must take back its commission."

David Carpenter, who said he and his wife will leave their base in London to join Stroope in mid-January, said the trend among younger Christians is for "hands-on" involvement in missions. "Baby boomers and Gen-Xers want direct connections. They don't want to send money; they want to send themselves. They want to be involved. ... That's what excites me about seeing churches being part of the work."

Stroope said All Peoples' approach would differ from partnership mission programs operated by many Baptist state conventions.

"For one thing, in All Peoples the local church is the one initiating the process and doing the sending," he said. "State partnerships are mainly state initiated and, often, [International Mission] Board initiated.

"Also, state partnership programs send out primarily short-term volunteers. By and large, they aren't long term."

Stroope was a key leader in crafting the IMB's nonresidential missionary approach, a concept which preceded the formation of Cooperative Services International. In 1988 -- when the concept was still new and untested -- he was one of the first missionaries appointed to utilize the nonresidential approach, ministering to Kurds in Turkey and Iraq. He held that assignment until 1992 when he became area director for CSI, coordinating that work until a reorganization of the board's structure last June.

In that reorganization, CSI was dismantled as a separate entity. Now, administrators in each of the board's 14 regions around the world employ CSI methodologies "as appropriate."

Stroope declined at least one position in the new IMB structure -- a second offer was later withdrawn by board administrators -- and instead accepted the board's offer of a year's furlough with an option of undefined service in the organization at its end. But in resigning before the furlough is completed, Stroope said he isn't protesting what some view as a diminished role for CSI.

"What the IMB is doing needs to be done," he said. "But there needs to be more done. Today there need to be multiple ways of getting the job done."

A recent meeting with IMB president Jerry Rankin to discuss All Peoples was "cordial," said Stroope. "I told him I wanted to cooperate and to add weight and value to the strategies that are continuing on the field and did not want to be a competition of any sort."

Officials at the Richmond, Va.,-based IMB declined comment.

David Carpenter agreed he is not motivated by the IMB's reorganization. "This is not a protest," he said. "This is just how God is leading us now. There is a worldwide move toward decentralization. In nations around the world, everything is breaking up into smaller units ... Things are different and we have to acknowledge that difference.

"There is nothing sacred about form. There is something sacred about sending missionaries out but not about form. If we make form a sacred cow, then we're in trouble."

Stroope said he has not talked to anyone at the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship -- an organization of moderate Baptists that some IMB administrators regard as a rival -- about ties between it and All Peoples and has no plans to do so. But he said interest in his group has come from churches in Texas, where the state Baptist convention recently approved a proposal to broaden the number of groups through which it supports mission work overseas.

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### **D.C. convention aligns with African-American group**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The predominantly white District of Columbia Baptist Convention has voted to align with the Progressive National Baptist Convention, a national group of 2,000 predominantly African-American congregations.

The D.C. convention, which has been dually aligned with both Northern and Southern Baptists since its founding in 1877, becomes the first state group in either the Southern Baptist Convention or American Baptist Churches, U.S.A. to be triply aligned.

"This move, under consideration for several years, takes our convention further in its historic mandate to advance the work of all Baptists in the United States," said Jere Allen, DC convention executive director.

Messengers overwhelmingly approved the move at the convention's annual meeting, held Nov. 17-18 at First Baptist Church in Washington.

The Washington-based PNBC was founded in 1961. In 1995 the group reported 2,000 churches with a combined membership of 2.5 million, according to the Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.

The new partnership "only strengthens two very healthy denominations," said Joseph Smith, pastor of Takoma Park Baptist Church, who chaired a special committee that managed the process. "The cross-pollination of members and leaders will place both groups in even more favorable positions to serve our Lord in greater Washington and around the nation," he said in discussion preceding the vote.

Member organizations contribute at least \$500 annually to the PNBC, entitling them to vote at annual meetings. Individual churches are encouraged to contribute at least 1 percent of undesignated gifts to the national body.

Changes in the D.C. convention's constitution to make the change fully operational will take a year.

In other business, the convention adopted a \$1.3 million budget and elected three lay persons as convention officers. John Munson, a member of First Baptist Church in Silver Spring, Md., is the convention's new president. Florence Dennis, a member of First Baptist Church in Washington, is vice president. LaTricia Jones, a member of Georgetown Baptist Church, is recording secretary.

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-- By Robert Maddox and Bob Allen

## **California Southern Baptists approve reorganization plan, despite debate**

VISALIA, Calif. (ABP) -- A sweeping reorganization plan for the California Southern Baptist Convention survived several parliamentary challenges before being approved by a wide majority of messengers at the group's annual meeting Nov. 11-12 in Visalia, Calif.

And, for the second time in five years, the convention refused to accept messengers from a San Francisco church whose pastor is a woman.

Following extended debate, the convention voted 359-181 to adopt 13 recommendations in the "Our Mission for a New Millennium" report developed by a 40-member strategic planning team and earlier endorsed by the convention's executive board. Some of the actions require constitutional changes, which must receive a two-thirds majority at next year's convention.

Messengers questioned recommendations to change the convention's name, divide the state into seven regions to determine representation on the executive board, and abolish a resolutions committee. All eventually passed.

A decade ago, California Southern Baptists had a "vicious" fight over a proposal to remove "Southern" from the convention's name, said Wiley Drake, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Buena Park. "I don't want to go there again. We're Southern Baptist and we ought to keep the name."

A committee recommendation calls for a name change but does not offer a specific suggestion for a new name.

Drake, who authored a resolution which eventually led to a boycott of the Disney Co. by the Southern Baptist Convention, also opposed a plan to cease resolutions by the state convention. "We are salt and light and our resolutions make a statement," Drake said.

Rob Zinn, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Highland and a member of the strategic planning team, responded that during an eight-month study it became clear that "resolutions were a negative" for the convention.

"If you want to be salt and light you don't do it from a convention floor, you do it through a local church," Zinn said, prompting applause and a request from the presiding officer to "refrain from applauding or booing."

In other business, the convention voted 329-227 to refuse to seat messengers from 19th Avenue Baptist Church in San Francisco because the congregation has a female pastor.

It was the fifth straight year that the convention opened with a challenge to the seating of messengers from the San Francisco church. For the last three years, messengers rejected those challenges and voted to accept the church's messengers. The church was unseated once before, in 1993, the year Julie Pennington-Russell became pastor.

Richard Barker, chairman of the convention's credentials committee, said I Timothy 3 describes the office of pastor in masculine terms. "The Bible says clearly, 'Let a man ...' It means exactly what it says," he said.

Despite that action, the convention rejected an effort to tighten membership requirements. The rejected constitutional amendment would have granted messengers only to churches with practices which do not "contradict" tenets of "The Baptist Faith and Message."

Observers saw rejection of the change as a vote for local-church autonomy and a sign that California Baptists were tiring of the dispute over membership.

The convention elected a president by acclamation. Roger Spradlin, pastor of Valley Baptist Church in Bakersfield and immediate past president of the executive board, succeeds Horacio Jones, who held the office less than four months.

Jones, pastor of Fremont Bible Fellowship in Fremont, was elected first vice president last year. He assumed office when president Harry Lewis of Ridgecrest moved from the state to accept a position with the North American Mission Board in Alpharetta, Ga.

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-- By Mark Wyatt and Bob Allen

## **House passes bills creating tougher policy toward China**

By Andrew Black

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Soon after Chinese President Jiang Zemin's recent state visit to the United States, the House of Representatives approved a series of bills designed to curb human-rights violations under the Chinese government.

As the first session of the 105th Congress drew to a close, nine bills focusing on U.S. policy toward China gained House passage Nov. 5-9. They included measures that would deny visas to Chinese officials who engage in religious persecution and provide for additional personnel in China to monitor human rights.

Other measures include a bill that would ban entry into the United States by Chinese officials "involved in the establishment or enforcement of population-control policies resulting in a woman being forced to undergo an abortion against her free choice."

Supporters of the measures criticized the Clinton administration as stressing cooperation and economics over human rights and American values. The proposals signal lawmakers' dissatisfaction with the administration's policies toward China, they said.

"The Chinese are watching our actions closely. This is an opportune time to be open and to be frank with the new Chinese leadership that the American people and Congress are concerned about a number of important issues in our bilateral relationship," said Rep. Benjamin Gilman, R-N.Y, chairman of the House International Relations Committee.

Gilman criticized the administration for "soft-peddling" issues such as religious freedom and democratization in China. He noted that this legislative package enabled lawmakers to avoid the familiar stalemate that often surrounds the debate over China's trade status.

Despite opposition from many Democrats, who urged caution and asked for greater opportunity to study and amend the proposals, all nine bills came to the House floor under a special rule that limits debate and the number of amendments that can be offered.

The individual bills passed by significant margins. The Forced Abortion Condemnation Act, which denies visas to officials involved in coercive abortions, passed 415-1.

Rep. Lee Hamilton, D-Ind., ranking minority member of the international-relations committee, said he supported many of the measures but worried about the combined impact they could have on Sino-American relations.

"Cumulatively, these measures will be perceived as anti-China bills. What concerns me most about the package of bills and some of the rhetoric that will accompany them is that the House will be perceived as demonizing China and China may very well respond in kind," Hamilton said.

He said the bills would not serve U.S. interests if, for example, China retaliated by denying entry to Billy Graham or other American religious leaders.

Graham made news this summer during the debate over extending most-favored-nation trade status to China. While not specifically endorsing the legislation, Graham sent a letter to a pro-MFN legislator that was shared with Congress, in which he urged support for friendly relations with China and warned against turning China into an enemy.

At Jiang's invitation, Graham had a half-hour meeting with the Chinese president during his visit, in which they discussed human rights and religious freedom in China, according to a Billy Graham Evangelistic Association news release.

"Twenty years ago hardly one church was open in all of China," Graham said. "Today there are tens of thousands, and we should be very grateful for that. Jesus told us to love our neighbor, and in today's world everyone is our neighbor," he said.

Three prominent U.S. religious leaders plan to visit China next year after the Chinese government extended an invitation to let the leaders set their own itinerary.

Other proposals passed before Congress adjourned Nov. 13 would:

- Require U.S. representatives at international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, to vote against special low-interest loans to China.

- Increase monitoring and deterrence of commercial entities controlled by the People's Liberation Army and other Chinese exports made using slave labor.

- Deny United States entry and travel to Chinese officials involved with the practice of harvesting and selling organs from prisoners.

- Provide additional funding for Radio Free Asia broadcasts.

- Help Taiwan develop its own ballistic missiles.

- Increase pressure on China to comply with arms trading agreements.

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**END**