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August 5, 1988

88-125

Controversial film released;  
SBC leaders to get screening

N-CO  
By Dan Martin

NASHVILLE (BP)--Universal Studios is rushing the theater release of its controversial film, "The Last Temptation of Christ," to Aug. 12, and has indicated it will honor a request by Southern Baptist leaders for a private screening of the Martin Scorsese movie.

The decision to hurry the release of the film was made by Universal Studios-Cineplex Odeon Films Aug. 4, according to Universal publicists, who said the decision was so "sudden people are all scrambling." A decision on the exact theaters and cities where the film will open will be announced during the week of Aug. 8.

A spokesman in the office of Sally Van Slyke, director of publicity for Universal, said a decision was made Friday morning, Aug. 5, to have a screening for "select leadership of the Christian community. They will be shown the final print, exactly what will be shown in theaters. A number of leaders have expressed their concern and interest to see the film and we are trying to accommodate them."

The spokesman added the screening "is not to determine whether we will release the film. That has already been announced. The screening is set up to give them a firsthand opportunity to see the film."

He added Universal has been contacted by Larry Braidfoot, general counsel of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, and the CLC representative is being invited to attend the New York screening.

Braidfoot told Baptist Press he had made two telephone calls and sent 10 letters, including two express-mail packages, to Universal officials since June 26, and, as of mid-day Friday, Aug. 5, had received no response.

In a letter to Universal's publicity director, Braidfoot noted the calls from "a number of individuals from the broader religious community who have advocated a boycott of the movie. It is entirely possible that this office might issue such a call to our 15 million members."

"We want to be very cautious in doing so," he added.

In the letter, he said a preview "would assist us in forming opinions objectively on a basis of firsthand viewing rather than on inferences from an original script or secondhand reporting." He added the preview would "assist us by enabling us to accurately inform our constituency about the nature of the movie."

He noted SBC President Jerry Vines, co-pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., had agreed to help arrange a small group of SBC leaders who would agree to view the film.

Vines, who has criticized the film as perhaps "the most offensive film yet to be produced in the United States," told Baptist Press he agreed to assist the preview effort, but added: "I myself would not view the film, because it is part of my lifestyle that I don't attend movies. I am not condemning others who do; I just don't. But I would be willing to get together a representative group of Southern Baptists who would be willing to do so."

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Braidfoot said a July 12 screening in New York City did not include any Southern Baptist leader "who works with our general leadership or with moral issues." He added: "A great deal of concern is being expressed by our constituency. Those of us who work with issues such as this are in the delicate position of not being able to give accurate information about the movie. We do not want to be in the position of criticizing something which we have not reviewed."

He told Baptist Press he has "no doubt that much of the handling of the movie has been done by Universal to create a controversy which would heighten publicity. That would increase Universal's profits. ... Also, the posturing of the studio has resulted in most of the criticism coming from persons who have not seen the movie."

Much of the criticism of the movie has stemmed from such groups as Donald Wildmon's American Family Association, which has called for telephone calls and petitions protesting the movie. Wildmon boycotted the July 12 screening, which was attended by "about 50 religious leaders."

Braidfoot charged the studio "invited a number of 'fundamentalists' who, they are quick to say, boycotted the preview. I am convinced that this boycott was anticipated, thereby enabling Universal to posture those calling for a boycott at theaters as persons who had not seen the movie. Thus critics would be cast in the least-favorable light."

In their statement concerning the early release of the film, Universal publicists wrote: "Few motion pictures in recent memory have generated such heated debate, especially when so very few people have actually seen the film. Rumors have proliferated; exaggerations, misconceptions and scenes taken out of context have added fuel to the fire."

It quoted Tom Pollock, chairman of the MCA motion picture group, Universal's parent corporation as saying, "The best thing that can be done for 'The Last Temptation of Christ' at this time is to make it available to the American people and allow them to draw their own conclusions based on fact, not fallacy."

The film, based on a novel by Nikos Kazantzakis, presents Jesus, as portrayed by Willem Dafoe, in a way offensive to most Christians, according to Christians who saw the July 12 screening. "I found it extremely offensive," said Evelyn Dukovic, a Catholic who is executive vice president of Morality in Media.

Much of the opposition has been generated by groups such as Wildmon's association, and James Dobson's Focus on the Family.

Wildmon told Baptist Press he boycotted the screening July 12, but said he had seen a script. He called the film blasphemous. Among the controversial scenes is one in which Jesus is being tempted by visions of what his life could be if he abandoned the cross. Included is a "fairly explicit" sexual scene with Mary Magdalene.

Universal publicists say Scorsese "believes he has made a very religious film ... , and (the studio) supports Martin Scorsese's right to express his personal artistic and religious vision and the right of individuals to decide what they will see and think."

Some opponents have called for Universal to destroy the film, not to release it or for theaters not to show it. Others have called for a boycott of the film. SBC President Vines urged Christians not to spend their money to see it, "thus assuring Universal Studios of its most colossal financial failure ever."

Lynchburg Baptist: small church with big ministry

By Jim Burton

F-10  
(B'hood)

WINTERHAVEN, Fla. (BP)--When Ron Patterson drives through the Winterhaven community of central Florida, he sees disaster.

Thousands of senior adults have moved into Florida, taking up residence in mobile homes -- the most vulnerable habitat in a natural disaster.

As a veteran disaster relief worker and advocate, Patterson knows better than to think it can't happen in Winterhaven.

"We have more exposure than any other state to hurricane damage," said Patterson. "We have a greater risk of loss of life than any other state."

The church where he is pastor in Winterhaven, Lynchburg Baptist, is committed to disaster preparedness and response. With 150 members -- mostly senior adults -- Lynchburg has emerged as a national leader in local Southern Baptist disaster relief.

"It's a major ministry of the church and it takes a lot of time," he said. "It would work in any of our churches who are committed in word and deed. My greatest concern is that there is not enough interest in disaster relief conventionwide."

Lynchburg's disaster relief ministry has grown to the point that it now includes five areas: feeding, shelter preparation, health screening, damage assessment, and warehousing food, materials, and supplies.

In 1987, Lynchburg dedicated a disaster relief vehicle. The trailer is equipped with a freezer and refrigerator and carries enough food to feed 8,000 meals before being restocked.

The trailer was donated, but Lynchburg spent two months and \$35,000 overhauling and equipping it for disaster response.

With the refrigerator and freezer, Lynchburg can respond to disaster with more than free soup and coffee. Members can prepare warm balanced meals.

"We've not had a major disaster in Florida since we built our trailer," said Patterson. "We got to thinking about it and said it's the cheapest insurance policy we've ever had."

Lynchburg also recently remodeled its fellowship hall and installed a commercial kitchen. Following American Red Cross guidelines, the fellowship hall is designed to serve as a precautionary shelter. About 200 people will be sheltered there when central Florida is under threat of natural disaster. As an ongoing shelter, it would serve 120-125 people.

As an outgrowth of disaster relief ministry, Lynchburg established a health screening service. "It began with just a blood pressure check, and we gradually expanded to a hemoglobin check, diabetes test, glaucoma test and a colon-rectal cancer check," said Patterson.

From June 1987 until March 1988, an average of 118 people came to the church for health screening one day a month. Serving mostly senior adults, Patterson said many people were referred immediately for urgent care by a physician: high blood pressure, 217; diabetes, 62; and glaucoma, eight.

"Several of these people were at stroke level and beyond," said Patterson. "They knew they had symptoms, but they were fearful to go to a physician. They just didn't have the funds."

The health screening ministry has been expanded beyond the church to include monthly visits to a mission and two retirement homes.

One of the first responses to any disaster is damage assessment. Patterson has trained a team of Lynchburg volunteers to respond to requests received through Southern Baptist channels. The damage assessment team determines the extent of damage caused by a disaster and the appropriate level of response.

In addition, Lynchburg disaster relief ministry has capacity to respond to national and international disasters by warehousing materials, supplies and clothes. Last year, the church sent shipments to the Philippines following a typhoon there.

"We have on hand, already boxed, labeled and ready to ship complete outfits of clothing for about 600 people," said Patterson. "We can clothe them from the skin out."

The visibility and reputation Lynchburg has gained through disaster relief has opened unusual, one-time ministries.

A Caribbean air-transport company that had offered its services to Lynchburg for disaster response called Patterson when it had a small crisis of its own. The company had ill-advisedly gone into the wholesale fish business. When it decided to bail out, the company called Patterson.

"They gave us 4,600 pounds of red fish, red snapper, grouper -- the finest fish you could possibly want," he said. "Our Baptist men went over to the frozen-food locker where it had been put and little-by-little brought it back and distributed that fish to needy families and missions throughout all of central Florida."

Patterson has discovered his commitment to disaster relief on the local church level is confusing to some people: "It's kind of funny," said Patterson. "To the fundamentalist, I'm a liberal. To the liberal, I think they consider me a fundamentalist."

"My philosophy is to minister in words and in deeds. I think we're missing it when we don't do that."

Disaster relief ministry has brought people into the church while creating unusual opportunities for Southern Baptist presence. "I can point to approximately seven professions of faith (in Christ) in our church since July of last year," said Patterson of disaster relief effectiveness.

And disaster relief is well-suited for senior adults. "They're being used again. They are feeling that their lives have value, that they are wanted and needed," said Patterson. "They're able to help others. That really gives them a good sense of satisfaction."

Patterson is active in both the American Red Cross disaster relief program and in Church World Service, an organization that coordinates the response of religious groups. In this capacity, he often ministers to disaster relief professionals.

"I've had Red Cross nurses call me in the middle of the night of a disaster and ask me to pray with them because they're so burdened with what they are dealing with," he said.

Last December and January, he was assigned by Church World Service to coordinate its efforts in West Memphis, Ark.

"I was able to minister and work with all the different denominations," he said. "I was able to share what Southern Baptists were doing and have done and can do."

Patterson sees growth for his church in disaster relief ministry.

"Any doors that open we'll go through," he said. "We hope to encourage other Baptist Men's units to catch the vision. It really brings new life to Brotherhood."

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(BP) photos available upon request from the Brotherhood Commission

Mountain missions  
needs still remain

By Jim Burton

F-10  
(B'hood)

PIPPA PASSES, Ky. (BP)--Atop a collage of gold and red is smoke. Somewhere in the mountains under the cover of fall foliage homes are hidden, nested against creeks. Pot-bellied stoves warm those homes with burning coal.

As was life in the 1880s, so goes life in the 1980s. Some things never change in Appalachia -- the land of the sky, called by some the chosen land of God.

After Southern Baptists organized mission work on Indian reservations, the region was the second area of institutional mission efforts, beginning in 1885.

Mountain missions captured the heart of Southern Baptists, said Wendel Belew, associate vice president for missions strategy interpretation at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

"They were likeable people," said Belew. "The Appalachian people are basically of Welch and Scotch stock. There was kind of a romance to the fact that these are historically OK people. They have an interesting vernacular, interesting music and an interesting way of living.

"I suspect the mountain feuds helped to emphasize the depravity. And those were pretty well known."

Until the Great Depression, Southern Baptist mountain missions efforts centered primarily upon establishing schools. Mars Hill and Gardner-Webb Baptist colleges in North Carolina grew out of that effort.

But a drop in missions giving during the Great Depression and an embezzlement scheme cost the Home Mission Board millions in unmet pledges and misused funds. The Home Mission Board could not maintain the mountain schools, which accounted for nearly 7,000 professions of faith in Christ during their existence. So the Home Mission Board reworked its strategy.

Belew, who was director of mountain missions in Kentucky from 1951 to 1956 before joining the board, was in charge of mountain missions for the convention.

"We made some new efforts in Kentucky," he recalled. "We established church-centered missions programs which ultimately became the pattern for pioneer missions programs at the Home Mission Board.

"We would support a county seat church with good leadership and then use their laymen in establishing missions.

"One time we had 300 missions operating in eastern Kentucky."

Southern Baptists owe more than their strategy for pioneer missions to Appalachia. In the 1940s and 1950s, thousands of Appalachians went to the industrial centers of the north seeking a better life.

Those who were Southern Baptist took their faith with them. Many pastors went along, working in factories and planting churches.

Today, about 20 million people live in Appalachia, which covers portions of 13 states from Alabama to New York. Southern Baptist mountain missions efforts originally were focused on the Southern Highlands area.

Appalachian counties have 8,828 Southern Baptist congregations with about 2.7 million members, said Gary Farley, associate director of rural-urban missions for the board.

The mountain areas are among the most under-evangelized sections in America, according to a Home Mission Board document, "The History of HMB Involvement in Appalachia." In many counties, less than 25 percent of the residents are church members.

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"We've never put as much money into Appalachia as the other mainline denominations have," said Farley, "but we've always been closer to the people."

Farley points to the bivocational dimension of Southern Baptist work in Appalachia as a successful model for ministry. Clear Creek Baptist School in Pineville, Ky., prepares Appalachian preachers for ministry.

"It takes these guys and gives them some theology to go along with their calling and prepares them to do the work at the head of the holler," said Farley.

Church planting probably is the greatest need in Appalachia, reported Ross Figart, mountain missions director for the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

"We really haven't had that spirit of reaching out and starting (mountain) missions for a number of years," he said.

Several obstacles block church planting and growth in eastern Kentucky.

"The inborn culture of the mountains is primarily from old Regular Baptists," Figart said of the region. "The emphasis is completely unevangelistic, (even) anti-evangelistic and missions. They are also strong against paid ministry and educated ministry."

But culture isn't the only obstacle. Southern Baptists typically base their strength on the work of the local church. But in Appalachia, the human needs surrounding churches often are overwhelming.

"Our emphasis on the local church as the primary place of ministry, I think, is a correct emphasis," said Figart. "But if the church doesn't have that vision and concept, then the model of what they tend to do and be is limited.

"The churches that are where the needs are the greatest are for the most part very weak. They are struggling financially, they have limited leadership and limited resources for their own needs."

The board is experimenting with new strategies that will assist in economic development designed to meet human needs.

Farley points to a quilting factory in Pound, Va., that was assisted financially by the board. The factory produced the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union centennial quilts.

Farley, who is a former eastern Tennessee county politician, said that instead of trying to capture runaway industries from the north, Appalachia needs to develop local entrepreneurs.

"I think the Southern Baptist Brotherhood could do some terrific things there," said Farley. "You've got people in Brotherhood who have the expertise that would help people put a business together.

"Mountain people are pretty resourceful. They don't need a lot of money. But if we can figure out some ways to help them have some cash money, then those who want to live in that setting and enjoy it can and should."

With more than 100 years of mountain missions work, the board's strategy has changed.

It has no unified approach to mountain missions. Most of the effort is directed by Farley, but other areas of the board, the church extension and Christian social ministries departments also have programs there.

"We don't have a (mountain missions) program," said Gerald Palmer, the board's vice president for missions. "We cooperate with the state conventions in a program to meet the needs of the mountains.

"I think we need someone to link things together in a constant look of what's being done. If we took all that's being done, we are probably doing more than we know. But we may also be ignoring a lot of places of unmet needs."