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Committee asking missionaries to share concerns about IMB policy

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- A Texas Baptist committee has set up an e-mail address to collect confidential information from Southern Baptist Convention missionaries who are concerned about signing an affirmation of the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

The Missions Review and Initiative Committee of the Baptist General Convention of Texas is coordinating the e-mail survey. It was announced in a widely circulated e-mail written by Keith Parks, a member of that committee and former president of the SBC Foreign Mission Board as well as former coordinator of global missions for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The committee's request was sparked by news that Jerry Rankin, president of the SBC International Mission Board, has asked all IMB missionaries to sign an affirmation of the current "Baptist Faith and Message."

That faith statement, which was drafted by an SBC committee without input from state Baptist conventions, has not been accepted by the BGCT and some other Baptist bodies. Common concerns include charges that the statement elevates loyalty to the Bible over loyalty to Jesus, downplays Baptist doctrines of the priesthood of the believer and autonomy of the local church and defines itself as an "instrument of doctrinal accountability."

Exactly what will happen to IMB missionaries who do not sign the required affirmation is unclear. Rankin told Baptist newspaper editors Feb. 13 that missionaries were invited to note areas of disagreement and, if they do so, will be counseled by regional IMB leaders. While denying that missionaries would be fired for disagreeing with points of the faith statement, he said IMB administrators had not yet determined how to handle such situations.

Rankin told the editors he hopes 100 percent of IMB missionaries will sign the affirmation.

However, initial reports from missionaries outside the United States indicate that is unlikely. Talk of at least some missionary resignations continues to circulate in e-mails and private conversations.

Parks reported that in the first few days after his e-mail began circulating, "a pretty steady stream of folks" wrote to the committee via the special address.

Exactly where the BGCT committee is headed with the data being gathered has not been announced. The committee met in subgroups and as a full group Feb. 18 and 19 in Dallas and is expected to bring a report to the BGCT Executive Board Feb. 25.

The main thing, Parks said, is "we wanted to say to missionaries who share our convictions, 'Don't feel forced to compromise your own understanding of what it means to be a Baptist.'"

A Feb. 19 Baptist Press story quoted Rankin as downplaying the efforts of the Texas missions committee. Rankin told Baptist Press that Texas and moderate Baptist leaders "are going to be surprised when so few, if any, IMB missionaries take them up on their offer of an alternate support base."

Rankin also said he believes some are presenting a "distortion of facts ... to advance their anti-SBC agenda."

"The presumption seems to be made that it is the IMB administration and trustees who are attacking missionaries," Rankin said. "To the contrary, we have absolute confidence in the doctrinal integrity of our missionaries and their commitment to Southern Baptist convictions as outlined in the 'Baptist Faith and Message.' After all, their own statement of beliefs were examined thoroughly and they affirmed the 'Baptist Faith and Message' when they were appointed."

"To dispel any question by others, we are just giving them an opportunity to reaffirm what they have already done and said," he added. "Most of our missionaries understand that this request was to give protection and credibility to them so we can get on with our task."

In the e-mail announcing the electronic address for communicating in confidence with the committee, Parks said: "All of us who value our heritage of 'no creed but the Bible' are incensed by this demand for creedal conformity. This is one of the most extreme (although expected) actions in the ongoing destruction of cooperative Baptist mission efforts to which many of us have given our lives, prayers and money."

Some IMB missionaries will "refuse to compromise their belief in the priesthood of the believer," Parks wrote. "Texas Baptists, and many other Baptists, refuse to abandon these missionaries to the unacceptable choice of compromising either their convictions or their calling."

Information gathered through the e-mail address will help the BGCT committee explore ways to create a "genuine Baptist option" for these missionaries, he wrote. "We are confident that our Baptist people will respond to a cry for help from the missionaries as they always have."

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: The e-mail address for communicating with the BGCT committee is newmissions@bgct.org.

NAMB asks 'national' missionaries to affirm 'Baptist Faith and Message'

By Bob Allen

ALPHARETTA, Ga. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist North American Mission Board is asking national missionaries to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" statement of doctrine.

The request doesn't affect the vast majority of NAMB missionaries, however, who are jointly funded with Baptist state conventions, associations or churches.

Marty King, the agency's director of convention relations, said there are 59 national missionaries that are fully funded by NAMB. That is out of a total missionary force of 5,081, according to last year's Southern Baptist Convention book of reports.

King said only national missionaries are NAMB employees. The rest legally work for the respective partnering entities. Administrative and professional staff at NAMB headquarters in Alpharetta, Ga., were asked to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" last year.

In a story released through Baptist Press, NAMB President Robert Reccord explained that the agency's funding of missionaries is "conceptually and significantly different" from that of its SBC sister agency, the International Mission Board. All IMB missionaries are fully funded by the mission board with money collected from churches through the Cooperative Program unified budget.

"Because NAMB shares its mission field with state conventions and associations, the vast majority of our missionaries are jointly funded unless their responsibilities transcend state lines or involve a national ministry like the United Nations," Reccord said.

Jointly funded programs are worked out in cooperative agreements between NAMB and the various state conventions. The first was set up nearly 50 years ago between NAMB's predecessor, the Home Mission Board, and the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Reccord said the concept has served "to leverage our missionary funding dollars."

IMB President Jerry Rankin recently asked all of nearly 5,200 international missionaries to reaffirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" in light of changes made to the confession of faith in 1998 and 2000.

Critics of that action complained that it violates Southern Baptists' historic aversion to creeds. Baptists traditionally have taught that the Bible is the sole authority in matters of faith and practice. Rankin denied the faith statement is being enforced as a creed but said Southern Baptists have a right to expect their missionaries to be doctrinally accountable.

Similar to IMB missionaries, NAMB national missionaries will be asked to respond yes or no to the sentence: "I have read and am in agreement with the current edition of the 'Baptist Faith and Message.'"

Whether or not a missionary cites an area of disagreement, he or she is then asked to sign a pledge "to carry out my responsibilities in accordance with and not contrary to" the faith statement.

"We see this as an opportunity for our national missionaries to join our staff in affirming the doctrinal guide approved by those who provide our support," Reccord said.

Reccord said the missionary-appointing agency has used the "Baptist Faith and Message" as a doctrinal guide since 1963. Since 1986, he said, NAMB has asked missionary candidates specifically to affirm the statement and agree to carry out their responsibilities in ways consistent with its teachings during the appointment process.

Reccord said missionaries are being contacted by phone to explain the request, which will be mailed in March.

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Bush raises religious freedom in talks with Chinese president

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bush has asked Chinese President Jiang Zemin to open dialogue with religious leaders about freedom of worship in China.

National security adviser Condoleezza Rice told reporters Feb. 21 in Beijing that the two leaders had "a really rather long exchange" about the issue in a far-ranging discussion with a small group.

She said Bush encouraged Jiang to "think hard about opening dialogue" with religious leaders, including the Vatican, the Dalai Lama and other organized religions.

China's record on religious freedom has been criticized of late because of reports of a crackdown on unofficial house churches and religious movements.

"China's future is for the Chinese people to decide, yet no nation is exempt from the demands of

human dignity," Bush said Feb. 21 in a joint press conference with the Chinese president. "All the world's people, including the people of China, should be free to choose how they live, how they worship and how they work."

Jiang told reporters he doesn't have a religious faith but is interested in religion and has read the Bible, Koran and the Buddhist scripture. He denied, however, that China restricts the practice of religion.

China's constitution guarantees the freedom of religion, Jiang said. However, the nation's laws also require churches to register and meet government-approved standards.

"Whatever religion people believe in, they have to abide by the law," he said. "So some law-breakers have been detained because of their violation of law, not because of their religious belief."

Jiang said as president, he has no right to meddle in judicial affairs concerning alleged violation of religion laws.

Rice said Bush would keep raising issues of religious freedom during his visit.

At the press conference, reporters asked Jiang why China had imprisoned more than 50 bishops of the Roman Catholic Church.

"Our view is that ... the Chinese government needs to release them," Rice said of the bishops. "And we've made that clear. We've made that clear at a number of levels. The Catholic Church has made that clear. And the president has really asked the Chinese leadership to engage the Catholic Church, which is really the way much of this will be resolved."

Rice said the two presidents' discussions focused on the desire "for a constructive relationship" between the two countries. Topics included cooperation against terrorism, North Korea, health issues including AIDS and trade issues.

Earlier, in Shanghai, Bush "talked at some length about his own religious beliefs" and thanked Jiang for being willing to listen. He also talked about the importance of religion in America.

"The president talked more this time about perhaps using the opportunities before China to engage religious communities about the value that religion had played in the United States during the time we've just come through, as a kind of stabilizing and calming force for the American people, and his desire and hope that this could be a period in which China would begin to reach out to religious communities," Rice said.

Jiang told reporters: "I don't have religious faith. Yet this does not prevent me from having an interest in religion. I've read the Bible. I've also read the Koran, as well as the scriptures of Buddhism."

Jiang said he often meets with religious leaders in China.

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