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Missionaries terminated for failure to affirm 'Baptist Faith and Message'

By Charlie Warren

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. (ABP) -- A missionary couple has been told their service with the Southern Baptist International Mission Board will end unless they affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

Rick and Nancy Dill, missionaries to Germany for more than 20 years, said they learned Oct. 10 that their employment with the IMB would end at the close of a stateside assignment next May.

"It is no longer possible for missionaries -- regardless of their service record -- to serve with the IMB if they are not willing to prove, through the signing of the document, their 'doctrinal accountability' to Southern Baptists as represented at the 2001 Southern Baptist Convention meeting," Rick Dill said in a letter mailed to several Baptist state papers. "So ends our 20 years of service with the IMB."

"I don't feel comfortable signing a fallible man-written document as the statement of my faith," said Dill, who with his wife are currently missionaries in residence at Ouachita Baptist University and are leading the college ministry at Park Hill Church of Arkadelphia, Ark.

IMB President Jerry Rankin asked current missionaries in January to affirm recent revisions to the "Baptist Faith and Message" or note areas of disagreement. While missionaries aren't required to agree with every detail of the faith statement, Rankin also asked them to sign a pledge saying they would carry out their work in accordance with and not contrary to the faith statement.

But the Dills, who in 1992 were the first Southern Baptists to move into the former East Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall, said they object to being asked to teach positions that they believe are unbiblical.

"Our conscience will not allow us to sign a document saying that we will teach something that does not reflect the truth of God's Word," Dill said in his letter. "Of course, this is the reason that Baptists have always refused to sign creeds (and actions of the IMB are definitely creedal.) Our authority is the Bible and no man-written document."

Avery Willis, senior vice president for overseas operations for the Richmond, Va.-based IMB, said the Dills have not been fired and that he hopes they will change their mind about refusing to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message."

"Southern Baptists ... deserve to know that their missionaries serve in sympathy with the deeply held convictions they have expressed in the 'Baptist Faith and Message,'" Willis said in a written statement.

Dill said he wrote his open letter because he feared people might otherwise assume he and his wife are liberal. "We are not heretics," he said. "We are conservative Christians. We are Baptists. We are Southern Baptists. We have served faithfully on a foreign field for over 20 years and want to continue that service for another 15. But we cannot in good conscience sign a document that we feel in several ways reflects neither the truth of Scripture nor the heritage that Baptists hold so dear."

The Dills fault the new "Baptist Faith and Message" for:

-- Removing a phrase from a 1963 version of the document saying, "The criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted is Jesus Christ." Defenders of the change said that some have misused those words to question biblical authority.

"The center of our faith is Jesus Christ -- God who became man, born of a virgin, crucified as atonement for our sin, raised on the third day, ascended to the right hand of the Father," Dill wrote. "All scripture comes from him and can only be understood through him."

-- Using the expression "priesthood of believers" in place of "priesthood of the believer."

"The authors of the 'Baptist Faith and Message' 2000 seem to mistrust or minimize the importance of the personal experience of the individual believer and his personal responsibility before God," Dill said.

-- The role of women in marriage. Dill said he believes Ephesians 5:21 teaches mutual submission of husbands and wives, rather than wifely submission as described in the "Baptist Faith and Message" article on the family. "It is perversion of the marriage relationship to reduce it to a question of power and control," he said.

-- The role of women in the church. "While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture," says the "Baptist Faith and Message" article on the church.

Dill said that doesn't belong in a confession of faith because "it is not central to the question of faith or orthodoxy." He also said he could find no "clear scriptural basis for denying women any office of service in the church."

Dill said he particularly doesn't understand why the IMB would oppose female pastors and at the same time say a growing missionary calling for women is "church planter."

"Church planters are pastors," he said. "How can we deny that God calls women to pastor and at the same time send them out all over the world to serve in that capacity?"

Dill said he, along with many fellow missionaries, viewed insistence that all missionaries affirm the faith statement as "a disturbing development in the politics of the SBC."

"We wrote immediately to say that we could not in good conscience sign the document," he said.

In a recent letter to missionaries who still haven't signed an affirmation of the doctrinal statement, Rankin wrote: "Allowance is provided for stating areas of disagreement. However, there cannot be flexibility in being unwilling to be doctrinally accountable and assure Southern Baptists that we will work in accord with our confession of faith and not contrary to it. To do so would erode the credibility and support of the IMB and bring into question your colleagues around the world."

Rankin said the request "is not an issue of your faithful and effective service or your adherence to doctrinal positions stated when you were appointed."

"You are now serving in the 21st century, and it is important to recognize and support the organization and positions of the denomination with whom you serve, even if there are some areas of personal disagreement."

Dill said he was told that personal disagreements noted by missionaries aren't even forwarded to IMB headquarters; just the signed statement that they will work within confines of the "Baptist Faith and Message."

"In other words, you can believe whatever you want. It doesn't really matter, just so you sign," Dill said. "We must as Southern Baptists maintain doctrinal integrity and the truth of Scripture, but that's different from

saying, 'Sign it now.' It's almost like they don't care what you believe just so you sign it. Which leads me to believe that the whole issue is not doctrine at all. It's adherence to a political party."

Even if they cannot continue to serve through the IMB, Dill said the couple intend to return to their work in Germany, where they have served since being appointed. He said they were the first IMB missionaries to enter the former East Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall and have been planting churches since that time.

"We went into a place where there were 11 people in a little group in a town of 67,000 to start a church," Dill said. "We thought it would be like pulling eye teeth, like it normally is in Germany, but instead, we've just experienced an outpouring of God's power and his Spirit."

Now the church has 170 members and has baptized more than 150 people. "That's just unheard of in Germany. God is up to something there. We just happened to get to play a part in that," Dill said. "We baptized 22 people just before we left. We want to return there because that church wants to start three new churches."

He said the church in Germany may partner with them to pay part of their support, and they will be attempting to find support from Southern Baptist individuals and churches.

"We think God will bless that because we feel God has called us to return there," Dill said. "We have always planned to spend our whole lives there."

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-- Charlie Warren is editor of the Arkansas Baptist News. Bob Allen contributed to this story.

Christian Coalition rallies for Israel

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Leaders of the Christian Coalition drew strong parallels linking interests of political conservatives, Israel and God at the group's national "Road to Victory: God Bless America -- One Nation Under God" conference.

Headlining the Oct. 11-12 meeting in the nation's capital, a "Support for Israel" rally featured Jewish-style dance and coalition founder Pat Robertson proclaiming: "There are millions of us [conservative American evangelical Christians], and we will stand with Israel regardless of what the United Nations does."

Coalition president Roberta Combs, who took over for Robertson in December, said support for Israel has always been integral to her faith, and conveyed to Israelis her organization's backing. "We want to pledge from the Christian Coalition that we will always be there for you," Combs said.

At the meeting's convention hall, booths featuring pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian literature nearly outnumbered those selling devotional books and music. The sign for the booth run by the Israeli State Tourism of Ministry read: "No One Belongs Here More Than You."

Coalition leaders said more than 10,000 attended the rally -- moved indoors because of rain and fear of sniper attacks. Others estimated the crowd at closer to 3,000, however.

Many observers predicted that Combs would use the meeting as an attempt to "revive" the coalition from recent years of declining influence and membership.

Robertson dismissed such characterizations as attempts by the "liberal media" to obscure the fact that the coalition has "always been here."

"This movement is alive," he said. "We aren't going anywhere."

Rep. Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.) echoed Robertson's view. "We're here today in Washington to let the political establishment know that the Christian Coalition is still in business ... and is more effective than ever," he said.

Combs said that, since taking over the group's leadership, God had inspired her to intensify the spiritual life of the coalition. The Washington conference featured keynote sermons by St. Louis-based pastor Joyce Meyer.

Combs said she felt God was telling her, "Bring the spiritual with the political; pray first, then participate."

The group still found room for two Mormons -- Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) and Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) -- among the more than 15 members of Congress to address the coalition. All were Republicans.

Like several of the speakers, Istook emphasized the importance for religious conservatives to elect a Republican Congress in the upcoming elections to ensure that President Bush's most conservative nominees to federal judgeships are approved.

"This battle that the president is engaged in on who can get into the judiciary is important for some of these religious-expression cases," Istook said. "A lot of these things are right on the edge, and we can turn them around."

Several speakers spoke derisively of the concept of the separation of church and state. "The notion of separating church and state with such policies as disallowing prayer in public schools is a deception from Satan," Meyer said.

One voice of dissent to the pro-Israel theme came from a small group of Orthodox Jewish protesters demonstrating outside the convention center. Holding signs reading "Zionism and Judaism are extreme opposites" and "Israel is a cancer for Jewry," members of a group called Neturei Karta International said actions of the Israeli government toward Palestinians violate Judaism and stir up anti-Semitic sentiment in Arab and Muslim countries.

"We were sent into exile by God and clearly forbidden by God to return to the land before the coming of the Messiah," said Rabbi Yisroel Weiss, the New York-based group's spokesman.

"Zionism was started 200 years ago by non-believing, non-practicing Jews," Weiss said, and the result of the Zionist movement has "caused Palestinian blood and Jewish blood to be spilled in rivers."

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Billy Graham begins Dallas 'metroplex' mission

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Billy Graham began what could be his last major evangelistic mission with the same message that he has proclaimed around the world for nearly 60 years.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life," Graham said, quoting from the familiar New Testament passage, John 3:16.

"Don't ever forget that God loves you," he told an audience of about 37,000 during the first session of the four-day "Metroplex Mission" at Texas Stadium in Irving, Texas, Oct. 17.

The crowd greeted the 83-year-old evangelist with a sustained standing ovation.

Graham's son, Franklin, helped his father to the lectern and stood by to preach if the elder Graham, who suffers from Parkinson's disease, was unable to complete his message.

Graham gripped the speaker's stand for a few minutes as he welcomed the crowd in a weak, cracking voice. Once he began his sermon, however, Graham stood erect, gestured boldly and spoke clearly for more than a half-hour.

"Our world is in turmoil," Graham said, mentioning war between Israelis and Palestinians, the threat of war with Iraq, a recent bombing in Indonesia and sniper attacks in Washington, D.C.

Graham said God has the answer to the world's turmoil, and that answer is found in the salvation that only Jesus Christ can provide.

"You can start over, right here tonight," he said, promising that God could forgive every sin and "wipe the slate clean."

As Cliff Barrows, Graham's longtime music director, led a 5,000-member choir from churches throughout North Texas in singing "Just As I Am," more than 2,000 people responded to the evangelist's invitation to make a commitment to Christ.

"Tonight you've come -- not to Billy Graham, but you've come to Christ," Graham told them.

Former President George Bush earlier introduced the internationally renowned evangelist as "the personal pastor to America's first family."

Bush -- whose appearance was not announced in advance -- pointed out Graham's ministry to both Republican and Democratic presidents dating back to Dwight Eisenhower.

"A lot of wonderful things happen to you when you become a former president. And for me, today is one of the nicest," Bush said, introducing a man he described as a "dear friend of all the Bush family" and "a genuine American hero."

Bush told how Graham spent the night at the White House at the first family's request when the United States entered Operation Desert Storm. "He prayed with us. We prayed that our coalition soldiers would be spared. We prayed that innocent Iraqi lives would be spared."

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