



# Associated Baptist Press

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## Former missionaries speak out on request to affirm faith statement

By Robert Marus

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. (ABP) -- Two former Southern Baptist missionary couples who lost their jobs rather than affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" aired grievances Nov. 9 at a gathering of moderate Baptists in Virginia.

Chris and Karen Harbin were terminated officially over charges that he persistently advocated "doctrinal opinions inconsistent" with the "Baptist Faith and Message" as a seminary professor in Brazil.

But the Harbins told about 400 people at a meeting of Virginia Baptists Committed they believe the main reason is their refusal to accede to a request by International Mission Board administrators to affirm the document or at least pledge to conduct their ministries in accordance with its teachings.

Another couple, Jan and Tim Webb, told the breakfast gathering held in conjunction with the Baptist General Association of Virginia annual convention in Virginia Beach that they resigned as missionaries to Mexico rather than endorse the faith statement.

But since they didn't specify that as a reason in their resignation letter, they said, they weren't included in an official count of missionaries who resigned rather than sign a faith statement they don't agree with or object in principle to signing a man-made creed.

Trustees of the IMB have adopted a policy requiring newly appointed missionaries to affirm the most recent version of the Southern Baptist Convention's official faith statement and all missionaries to conduct their work in accordance with and not contrary to its teaching, even if they disagree with minor points.

Early this year, however, IMB President Jerry Rankin said the trustee decision to not require all missionaries to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" backfired, causing some critics to question whether some missionaries held views contrary to those in the faith statement last revised in 2000. Rankin told missionaries he believed those fears were unfounded, but asked all missionaries to sign an affirmation of the "Baptist Faith and Message" to demonstrate their doctrinal fidelity.

Chris and Karen Harbin, missionaries in Porto Alegre in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, declined. They said they were asked immediately to meet with Robin Hadaway, the IMB's regional leader for eastern South America, to discuss their refusal.

At the meeting, the Harbins said, they were informed that he was being terminated "for the persistent advocating of doctrinal opinions inconsistent with the 'Baptist Faith and Message.'" Since they were appointed as a couple, by IMB policy Karen Harbin was terminated automatically along with her husband.

The Harbins said they were told that 12 Brazilian Baptist nationals gave IMB officials notes from Chris' class lectures at the Baptist Seminary of Rio Grande do Sul, highlighting teachings they found objectionable. The Harbins said the notes primarily dealt with lectures he had given on the nature and inspiration of the Bible.

They said the Brazilian Baptists who reportedly objected "have never been named and the seminary is unaware of any complaints."

The Harbins said Hadaway gave them a letter Sept. 12 informing them of their termination. The letter said Harbin could visit his seminary class once more to say goodbye but could no longer teach. Any meetings with Brazilian Baptists or fellow missionaries were prohibited, unless the Harbins field supervisor, Larry Braswell, was present.

The Harbins and Hadaway exchanged a series of e-mails, in which Hadaway said he had learned that a mass e-mailing was being circulated saying the couple was being terminated for not signing the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

"This is not true," Hadaway wrote. "No IMB missionary has been terminated for this. You are being terminated for 'the persistent advocating of doctrinal opinions inconsistent with the Baptist Faith and Message.'"

When the couple appealed their dismissal, however, Karen Harbin said a superior of Hadaway's linked their appeal to affirmation of the "Baptist Faith and Message."

Avery Willis, senior vice president for overseas operations at the IMB, said Harbin's written material was "clearly over the line regarding the nature and inerrancy of Scripture."

Willis said he would reconsider their appeal one last time, however, if Harbin would affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message" in writing and repudiate parts of his syllabus that appear to be in conflict with it.

Karen Harbin said her husband responded by affirming the 1963 version of the faith statement instead of the 2000 version and telling Willis that heresy charges against him did not reflect his beliefs. Portions of his syllabus quoted against him, he said, were poorly translated from their original Portuguese or taken out of context. In some cases, he said, positions he described were attributed to him without including later sections in which he refuted them.

Chris Harbin submitted the entire manuscript he used with the class to Mark Biddle, a professor of theology at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, who described Harbin's views as "squarely in the center" of contemporary evangelical scholarship.

The Harbins also said IMB officials had seen essentially the same material in 1999, but no one objected before April 2002.

Hadaway and Braswell did not respond immediately to e-mailed requests for comment.

Mark Kelly, a spokesman at the IMB's headquarters in Richmond, Va., however, said the Harbins' dismissal had nothing to do with their refusal to affirm the "Baptist Faith and Message." "IMB leaders have read Chris Harbin's writings, and numerous positions on the nature of the Bible are clearly outside the parameters acceptable to Southern Baptists," Kelly said. "It is unfortunate that he did not balance positions he said were designed to 'challenge the thinking of his students' with a strong presentation of advocacy for the inerrant word of God."

Jan and Tim Webb also spoke at the Nov. 9 meeting. They resigned as missionaries to Mexico in July rather than endorse the "Baptist Faith and Message."

"In the beginning, I was in favor of signing it because although I didn't agree with everything [it said], it would secure our ministry and we could go on with our lives," Jan Webb said. She said she knew other IMB missionaries who also disagreed philosophically with the statement but were planning to affirm it in order to avoid ending their ministries.

The Webbs eventually came to view it as a matter of integrity and refrained from affirming the confessional document.

Webb said the couple did not state disagreement with the "Baptist Faith and Message" explicitly in their resignation letter. "In hindsight, we realize now we should have stated it, because we are not among the official count of resignations associated with the 'Baptist Faith and Message.'"

According to a Baptist Press story dated Nov. 7, a total of 16 missionary units, or 32 people, have cited the "Baptist Faith and Message" affirmation request as a factor in their resignation.

The Webbs and Harbins both said they and other IMB missionaries increasingly felt like they were treated as "employees" rather than ministers of the gospel by the mission board's fundamentalist leadership.

"As time has passed, we've seen the organization be transformed into a corporation with a hierarchy and operating like a business, rather than a ministry," Tim Webb said.

"Many of the missionaries we know didn't have a problem signing the 'Baptist Faith and Message' because they looked on it like signing a contract with any corporation you would work for."

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## **Georgia Baptists, Shorter College likely to sever ties trustee election**

By John Pierce

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The Georgia Baptist Convention elected eight new trustees for Shorter College during a Nov. 11-12 annual meeting in northwest Atlanta. None, however, was from the list of 16 candidates submitted by the college's current board of trustees.

That means trustees of the college will reject all eight, because a bylaw adopted in May requires that all future members of the board be approved by college prior to election, said Shorter President Ed Schrader.

Rejection of the new GBC-elected trustees would likely signal the end of a 44-year relationship between the college and convention. The two parties disagree on how trustees are to be elected, as well as over the reasons the college changed its bylaws.

Schrader says the college responded to an accreditation concern over the independence of the trustee board and said he has provided supporting documents to GBC leaders. GBC Executive Director Bob White, however, tied the action to an unfounded fear of a fundamentalist takeover of the school.

"There is no intent on the convention's part to take over the college," White told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

This summer, however, White wrote an open letter regarding Shorter quoting a GBC leader as having concern "regarding the faithfulness of Shorter College's leadership and faculty to Baptist heritage, faith and practice."

The convention recently released some funds to Shorter designated as scholarships for Baptist students. The remaining funds are being held in escrow and will likely be redistributed to another GBC entity.

An additional \$8 million in capital improvement funds for the college are being held by the Georgia Baptist Foundation. Determining whether the college or the convention gets that money might require legal action.

Schrader said the trustee board's executive committee met Nov. 13 to draft a response to the GBC election. The full board of trustees will meet soon to formally consider the plans, he said.

Schrader said the school has been a Baptist college since 1873 and plans to remain one. "Whether someone at the GBC endorses it has no bearing on whether we will be a Baptist college," said Schrader. "We will be a Baptist college."

In other business during the GBC annual meeting, messengers re-elected Wayne Robertson of Valdosta as president, honored Bob White for 10 years of service as executive director and approved formation of a 10-member committee to study the relationship of the convention with its institutions.

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