

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee

Missionaries told they can't return to field without signing statement
By Mark Wingfield
Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com
January 24, 2003
Volume: 03-06-3422

MAR 24 2003

EDITOR'S NOTE: This story is revised from its earlier release.

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) – Some international missionaries supported by donations from Southern Baptist churches are getting "the call." But this call, they contend, is not from God.

Instead, the calls are being made by Avery Willis, senior vice president for overseas operations with the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board.

Willis is calling missionaries who have chosen not to sign an affirmation of the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message as requested by IMB President Jerry Rankin one year ago.

According to multiple reports from missionaries and their families, Willis is telling the missionaries they cannot continue to serve with the IMB if they don't sign an affirmation of the controversial faith statement.

This does not constitute "termination," however, the IMB insists.

IMB officials have repeatedly said that no missionaries have been fired for failure to sign the affirmation of the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message. Rankin's request, the administrators have said, is a voluntary one with no predetermined consequence for those who decline to sign.

Asking missionaries to affirm the revised faith statement is necessary to dispel charges of heretical teaching leveled by unnamed accusers, Rankin said last year.

The IMB confirmed that Willis has been making phone calls since the first of the year to missionaries who have not signed.

"These calls are not being made to inform people that they are being fired. Avery is seeking to counsel missionaries and persuade them to make the affirmation," said Clyde Meador, associate vice president of overseas operations.

But missionaries on stateside assignment (or furlough) won't be allowed to return to the field without signing the affirmation, an IMB spokesman said. And those preparing to come back to the United States for stateside assignment are being told they must make their decisions before coming back.

It is not clear how the IMB will handle non-affirming missionaries who are not scheduled for stateside assignment soon.

Steve and Kay Armstrong, who currently are on leave of absence in Dallas, are among the missionaries who recently received a call from Willis.

In a written summary of that Jan. 15 phone call, Steve Armstrong recounted the events this way: "I asked if signing was still only a request. Avery said, 'Yes.' I asked if missionaries are going to be terminated for non-compliance to this request. He reacted that 'they have not made that decision yet.' But then he went on to explain that they had in fact made a decision that no missionary would be allowed to return to the field from stateside assignment or leave of absence without signing the Baptist Faith & Message statement of accountability."

When Armstrong referred to this as "termination," he said, Willis replied that the IMB is not using that word.

Armstrong said he reiterated to Willis that he and his wife could not in good conscience sign the affirmation as required. "I asked him to please finalize the decision [about their future service] as soon as possible. He said, 'You

can take that as a final decision."

A similar account is told by Leon and Kathy Johnson, who received a call from Willis Jan. 13. The Johnsons currently are serving in Mozambique and are 20-year veterans of IMB service.

When Willis called the Johnsons, Leon Johnson asked him four questions, he reported:

- "Has the SBC taken any action to require veteran missionaries to sign the Baptist Faith & Message?" Willis reportedly answered no.
- "Have the trustees of the IMB taken any action to require us to sign?" Again, Willis answered no, Johnson said.
- "Is there any policy of the IMB requiring us to sign?" Willis also answered no to this point.
- "Is this a request?" To this question, Johnson said, Willis answered yes.

Johnson then suggested that a "request" may either be granted or denied. "Since to grant this request would be a violation of our consciences, Kathy and I deny the request," he told Willis.

By Johnson's account, Willis then warned him twice that there would be "consequences" for not signing. "Dr. Willis replied that he respected our consciences but we must sign in order to avoid loss of support for the IMB from the SBC."

The Johnsons have refused to sign the affirmation of the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message because they believe it is being used as a non-Baptist creed. To sign it "would place a man-made document in authority above the Bible and God's self-revelation in Jesus," he explained. "For us to sign would be a sin in our minds. We have sought to explain our reasoning in vain."

Larry Cox, IMB vice president for mobilization, disagreed. "The IMB is not forcing a creed on any missionary because workers are not being asked to change their beliefs to conform to any document," Cox said. "Differences of interpretation based on Scripture are not an obstacle to service as long as the missionaries promise to conduct their work in harmony with the confession of faith adopted by the churches."

The Johnsons and the Armstrongs dispute the IMB's stated position that signing the affirmation is merely a "request" and not a mandate for employment.

"If this were really only a request and only a statement of faith, no one would be going to these great lengths to pressure and demand compliance to this document, and no one would be judged or terminated for refusing to sign it," Armstrong wrote.

More than 30 missionaries have resigned or taken early retirement within the last year rather than sign the affirmation of the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message. Others are believed to have resigned or retired for the same reason but without making that reason explicitly known.

Rick and Nancy Dill were among the first IMB missionaries to receive "the call" from Willis. They were called Oct. 10 in Arkadelphia, Ark., where they are on stateside assignment as missionaries in residence at Ouachita Baptist University.

In that October call, Willis told the Dills they could not return to their work in Germany without signing the affirmation as requested by Rankin. They told him they would not sign.

In public statements afterward, Willis insisted the Dills were not being terminated.

"Rick and Nancy Dill have not been terminated," he told the Arkansas Baptist News. "They are fine missionaries, and

we would hate to lose them. ... We are hoping they will decide to affirm the Baptist Faith & Message before the time comes for them to be released to return to the field in May."

Other accounts of missionaries receiving the same type of phone call from Willis have been reported within the last week, but these missionaries have asked for their names not to be made public yet. Some are struggling to determine what they will do. Some are asking for a few more months to conclude projects currently underway.

The stress of the situation is taking a toll on missionary families, however, reported one relative of a missionary couple who refuse to sign. The stateside relative told of a missionary child who has developed physical symptoms of anxiety because of the stress the parents are under.

"I believe this is a time when we need to wrap our arms around these families and help them through a terrible injustice," the relative wrote.

abo

Copyright 2002 Associated Baptist Press. All rights reserved.

Go To: [\[ABPNews Home\]](#) [\[What's ABP?\]](#) [\[Links\]](#) [\[Town Hall\]](#) [\[The Stacks\]](#) [\[React!\]](#)

Passport hires Todd Heifner as director of development**By ABP staff****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****January 24, 2003****Volume: 03-06-3421**

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) – Todd Heifner of Birmingham, Ala., has joined the staff of Passport as the organization's first director of development.

Heifner will work with individual donors, churches, foundations and denominational groups to develop a permanent funding base for the Birmingham-based Christian camp ministry.

Heifner has been director of development for the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington, D.C., for the past two and a half years. Previously he was a development officer at Samford University in Birmingham.

"I still believe wholeheartedly in the Baptist Joint Committee, and I believe that there is no more important agency in mainstream Baptist life," Heifner said. "Kit and I personally will continue to be strong advocates for the BJC, but this was a good decision for our family at this time for me to be based in Birmingham and have fewer travel commitments."

"Hiring Todd Heifner marks a new day within our organization," said Passport president David Burroughs. "Todd will allow us to expand our foundation while extending our ministry."

Heifner graduated from Samford University with a degree in public administration and has graduate degrees from Samford and Vanderbilt University. His wife, Kit, is a systems analyst with Blue Cross Blue Shield of Alabama. The Heifners have two sons and are members of Baptist Church of the Covenant in Birmingham.



Copyright 2002 Associated Baptist Press. All rights reserved.

Go To: [[ABPNews Home](#)] [[What's ABP?](#)] [[Links](#)] [[Town Hall](#)] [[The Stacks](#)] [[React!](#)]