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IMB fires 13 missionaries who won't sign; another 30 resign, retire over statement
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FRAMINGHAM, Mass. (ABP) – Firings and forced resignations, long a part of the conservative rise to power at Southern Baptist seminaries and news organizations, made their way to the foreign mission field May 7.

Trustees of the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board, meeting in Framingham, Mass., terminated 13 missionaries who refused to affirm the SBC's new, more conservative faith statement, the 2000 "Baptist Faith & Message."

It is believed to be the largest group of SBC missionaries ever fired at one time. The IMB is not releasing the names of the missionaries involved.

Another 20 missionaries resigned in recent days rather than sign the doctrinal statement and 10 more took retirement, according to the IMB. They join at least 34 missionaries who resigned last year in protest of the requirement to sign.

That means at least 77 IMB missionaries have left the mission field because of the new faith statement – presumably the agency's largest exodus ever over one issue.

The IMB employs about 5,500 missionaries, including career and short-term appointees. According to the IMB, 99 percent agreed to the new statement.

Jerry Rankin, IMB president, said he is "grateful" for the missionaries who signed willingly. "We regret that any of our missionaries have chosen to resign rather than affirm the faith statement, but we feel it is time to move forward and keep our focus on sharing Christ with a lost world," he said in a press release. Critics of the revised confession, adopted by the SBC in 2000, object to its prohibition against woman pastors and contend it weakens the traditional Baptist doctrines of the autonomy of the local church and priesthood of the believer and places the Bible in higher esteem than Jesus as a guide to biblical interpretation.

The primary conflict cited by missionaries, however, is a feeling that signing any faith statement amounts to affirming a creed – something historically anathema to Baptists. Rankin and other SBC leaders, however, have insisted the signing is necessary to assure Southern Baptists their missionaries are working within boundaries set by the convention.

"It is not appropriate to expect Southern Baptists to support those who are not willing to work in accord with what the denomination confesses to believe," Rankin said. "To do so would undercut the credibility and confidence in the IMB as a denominational mission entity serving Southern Baptists."

The terminations were carried out without dissent from the trustees, according to an IMB spokesman.

"The SBC family has been in strong agreement concerning our statement of faith," said Bob Claytor, chair of the IMB trustees. "Our board reflects that agreement and 99 percent of our missionaries are also in strong agreement."

While most of the non-signing missionaries were given the option of resigning, at least six were not – Ron Hankins and Lydia Barrow-Hankins (Japan), Rick and Nancy Dill (Germany) and Leon and Kathy Johnson (Mozambique). The six, who each have more than 20 years of service, had publicly opposed Rankin's requirement to sign the faith statement. In a letter informing them they would be fired, Rankin accused them of "unwillingness to be accountable to Southern Baptists who send and support you."

The firings climaxed a series of events that began in February 2002 when Rankin, in response to reported suspicions about missionaries' doctrinal integrity, asked IMB missionaries to endorse the doctrinal statement. They later were given a May 5 deadline to decide.

- Mark Wingfield contributed to this article.

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