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Rankin says bad theology explains uproar over fired missionaries, but Parks says no

By John Pierce

(ABP) -- Negative reaction to the termination of Southern Baptist missionaries who refused to affirm the Baptist Faith and Message did not catch International Mission Board President Jerry Rankin by surprise, he said in a recent editorial.

"It was not unexpected that many among our Southern Baptist constituency who do not agree with the leadership and conservative direction of the SBC -- as well as those who are in disagreement with the faith statement itself -- would disagree with this initiative," Rankin said in an opinion column released by Baptist Press Sept. 5.

Rankin, who reversed an earlier commitment not to impose the controversial doctrinal statement on missionaries, said weak theology and independent thinking are the reasons why some Southern Baptists objected to the terminations.

"(R)eflection upon the negative response from individuals and the media over the past year has revealed that an alarming number of Southern Baptists have succumbed to the subtle influence of postmodern thinking and theological compromise," he wrote. "Many are offended that denominational workers would be expected to adhere to any defined commonality of faith. It is evident the precious doctrine of individual priesthood of believers is being distorted to justify whatever arises out of self-centered, independent thought, regardless of explicit biblical teaching to the contrary."

Not so, said Keith Parks, Rankin's predecessor at the mission board. Parks was asked to respond to Rankin's column by Kentucky Baptists' Western Recorder newspaper.

Rankin "accuses those who reject the 2000 BF&M of postmodern theology, which he seems to define as

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rejection of absolute truth as revealed in Jesus Christ and recorded in Scripture," said Parks. "Let it be understood that liberal, postmodern theology was never accepted among staff or missionaries of the Foreign Mission Board (now the IMB)."

Parks said he was never accused of unsound doctrine during his 38 years with the board but left because he "would not support the divisive, politically-motivated, ultra-conservative resurgence." After leaving the mission board, Parks became the first global missions coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

As board president, Parks said he personally reviewed rare cases (10 out of 4,000 missionaries) when accusations were made about missionaries holding unacceptable doctrine. In only two cases, he said, were missionaries dismissed.

Rankin described Baptists as "a confessional people" who have expressed their positions on doctrine and social issues for more than 400 years.

"Theological truth is absolute, so theology does not change," said Rankin, "but as long as the world and society change, it will be necessary for churches and denominations to express where they stand and what they believe the Scripture teaches on contemporary issues, if they are to maintain their distinctives and be salt and light in the world."

Critics of the revised faith statement -- which omits an earlier affirmation of Jesus as the criterion for interpreting Scripture and limits women's roles in both church and home -- are incorrect in calling the statement a creed or a significantly altered document, said Rankin.

"In reality the 2000 BF&M has not changed any beliefs at all," said Rankin. "Recent revisions have simply spoken to contemporary issues by confessing what the Bible has always taught -- and Southern Baptists have always believed and practiced...."

"If the 2000 BF&M changes nothing in belief or practices of the past," Parks countered, "why was it mandatory for missionaries to sign? ... If it is no different, why is it the only decision that has resulted in so many missionary resignations and early retirements?"

At least 77 IMB missionaries either resigned, retired or were fired because of the requirement to affirm the 2000 faith statement. The exodus was the IMB's largest ever over one issue.

Parks enumerated several "regrettable changes" he saw in the revised statement and its use by denominational leaders, including "the presumption that a select few have exclusive access to biblical truth" and "the assumption that messengers at the SBC annual meeting have the prerogative to dictate doctrine to Baptist churches and individuals."

However, Rankin said many Baptists who react negatively to the 2000 BF&M and its imposition on missionaries "proclaim their conviction that the Bible is their only authority but then refuse to be accountable for believing and practicing its specific and explicit teachings."

"One has succumbed to the relativism of postmodern thought when one says missionaries deserve our support regardless of what they believe or teach," Rankin wrote.

Parks said that Rankin has "joined other current [SBC] leadership in seeking not only to rewrite history but in accusing anyone who rejects a creed of not believing in absolute truth."

According to Rankin, creeds are simply statements of belief. "Perhaps the reason creeds are spoken of with such disdain is that so many -- typical of postmodern thought -- really do not believe anything as absolute truth anymore."

One IMB missionary who lost his job for refusing to sign the doctrinal statement also disputed Rankin's reasoning.

"There is not a shred of truth in the accusations that we have succumbed to postmodern thinking, relativism, and theological compromise," said Steve Armstrong of Duncanville, Texas, who said he is not being allowed to return to the mission field from leave of absence because he and his wife, Kay, refused to sign the Baptist Faith and Message. "If we were given to compromise and self-centeredness, wouldn't we have just gone along with the request to sign a piece of paper to save our careers?"

Armstrong, who identifies himself as a biblical inerrantist, said he is "saddened and dumbfounded" by the charges in Rankin's editorial. "Can our own president be making these false accusations against us and our fellow missionary friends who have faithfully served the Lord and Southern Baptists for so many decades?" asked Armstrong, who was appointed by the IMB in 1982.

"We have been betrayed by our own president who has now finally revealed that he was one who positioned himself to be our accuser, prosecutor, and judge," he added. "I realize now I was wrong to believe the best about our IMB leadership."

Requiring missionaries to sign a "creedal vow" to the Baptist Faith and Message, Armstrong said, is a violation of the doctrinal statement itself, which says it has "no authority over the conscience."

"This raises the document to a level above the Scriptures and the lordship of Christ over our lives and ministries, making the wording of the BF&M the final judge," he said.

- Greg Warner contributed to this story.

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Vietnam still repressing religion, say U.S. legislators, commission

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Three members of Congress and a federal human-rights panel are calling on the Bush administration to crack down on Vietnam for its continuing violations of religious freedom.

In a Capitol Hill press conference Sept. 17, Reps. Chris Smith (R-N.J.), Loretta Sanchez (D-Calif.) and Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) joined members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom in calling for Congress and the administration to take measures against the Asian nation's communist government. Their calls were spurred by the recent conviction and sentencing to prison terms of the niece and nephews of a Vietnamese Catholic priest who is already imprisoned.

"In category after category -- and especially in the area of religious freedom -- there has been a crackdown" in Vietnam in recent years, Smith told reporters. "We're not going to sit idly by while

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[Vietnamese government officials] continue to oppress."

Commission chairman Michael Young and vice chair Nina Shea, speaking for their fellow panel members, again called for the State Department to declare Vietnam a "Country of Particular Concern," or CPC, under the terms of the federal law that created the panel. The designation would allow the administration to begin steps -- including certain sanctions -- designed to encourage compliance with international human-rights norms regarding religious freedom.

The commission has previously called for CPC status for Vietnam. However, the State Department has so far declined to issue such a designation.

Young, dean of the George Washington University Law School, noted that the commission was trying to call attention to the Sept. 10 conviction and sentencing of Nguyen Thi Hoa, Nguyen Truc Cuong and Nguyen Vu Viet in Vietnam. Their chief crime, apparently, was alerting American reporters to the October 2001 arrest and imprisonment of their uncle, Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, a Catholic priest and human-rights activist.

Shea said the commission "feels a special obligation towards Father Ly and his family" because his arrest and imprisonment were partially spurred by written testimony he submitted to the commission in February 2001.

In that testimony, Ly mentioned -- among other violations of religious freedom he had witnessed -- that communist officials had imprisoned religious leaders, violated the Catholic Church's freedom of the press and "brutally interfered" with the authority of the Vietnam Catholic Bishops' Conference to appoint bishops and priests.

Congress passed the U.S.-Vietnam Bilateral Trade Agreement in September 2001. Supporters said liberalizing trade relations and instituting regular dialogues between State Department officials and Vietnamese leaders on human-rights issues would help improve conditions for religious freedom and other civil liberties in the nation.

Rep. Sanchez and some other members of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus opposed the normalization. "Why would we grant normal trade relations to someone who can't even live up to basic human-rights standards?" she asked at the press conference.

Shea echoed her concern. "It is apparent now that dialogue is not working, and that [free] trade alone is not an adequate human-rights policy," she said.

The House already has passed a bill with a provision, authored by Smith, that would prohibit increases in non-humanitarian U.S. aid to the Vietnamese government until, according to Smith, "Hanoi makes significant progress toward releasing political and religious prisoners and respecting the human rights of ethnic minorities, among other things."

The provision, called the Vietnam Human Rights Act, is attached to the House's version of the bill authorizing fiscal year 2004 funding for the State Department. While Smith expressed hope that a similar provision will be added to the Senate's companion bill, it is not a certainty.

The Vietnamese government denies it suppresses religious freedom. In a document on the website of the nation's embassy to the United States, government leaders argue: "If the state of Vietnam today suppressed religions, how could there exist up to 500 Protestant churches. How could the Protestant

church of Vietnam just come to being? How could six seminaries be established from 1987 to 1994? How can Vietnam possibly be home to the second largest number of bishops in Asia (second only to the Philippines)?"

But reports by the Commission on International Religious Freedom and the State Department reveal a different picture. The commission's May 2003 report noted scores of activists from a number of Vietnamese Christian and Buddhist groups -- including Buddhist monks -- were imprisoned for protesting violations of religious freedom and other human rights.

The State Department's 2002 International Religious Freedom Report -- the most recent one available -- listed several other religious-freedom violations in Vietnam, including "credible reports" of Vietnamese Christians from the Hmong and Montagnard ethnic minority groups being forced to recant their faith by government officials.

When asked why the State Department had not yet declared Vietnam a CPC, a department spokesperson referred an ABP reporter to the department's 2002 report.

Despite saying the Vietnamese government's "status of respect for religious freedom remained fundamentally unchanged during the period covered by this report," the department noted there had been improvements in some areas. It concluded, "Some religious sources have cited diplomatic intervention, primarily from the U.S., as a reason why the government is seeking to legalize more religious groups and is allowing already legalized groups more freedom."

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Promise Keepers founder resigns to care for ailing wife

By ABP staff

DENVER, Colo. (ABP) -- Promise Keepers founder Bill McCartney announced Sept. 16 he will resign from his position as head of the popular men's movement to take care of his ailing wife and spend more time with his family.

McCartney, 63, made his plans known during a Promise Keepers board of directors meeting. He has been on leave from the Denver-based ministry since March to tend to his wife, Lyndi, who has a severe respiratory illness. His resignation is effective Oct. 1.

"The ministry of Promise Keepers is not finished," McCartney said in a statement. "It is needed now more than ever."

Promise Keepers was founded 13 years ago by the former University of Colorado football coach as an evangelical Christian men's movement that focused on male bonding, racial reconciliation and men being spiritual leaders in their households. The organization reached its peak in 1997 with a rally called "Stand in the Gap" that drew an estimated 1 million men to Washington's Mall.

The ministry has suffered in recent years, however. Declining attendance and staff layoffs have forced the organization to regroup. It now faces the challenge of moving forward without its best-known and

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most charismatic figure.

Retired Army Gen. Alonzo Short, chairman of the Promise Keepers board, will serve as interim president, a role he has filled since McCartney went on sabbatical.

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Baylor regent resigns over conflict of interest

By Mark Wingfield

WACO, Texas (ABP -- Houston pastor Duane Brooks resigned from the Baylor University board of regents Sept. 18, citing concerns raised about a potential conflict of interest.

The Dallas Morning News reported Sept. 7 that Brooks' service on the board violated a policy of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which elected him to the post. His brother, David Brooks, is Baylor's chief financial officer.

Duane Brooks' role as a regent did not conflict with Baylor's conflict of interest policy, according to Juan Alejandro, Baylor's director of internal audit and management. Alejandro issued a statement Sept. 12 saying the allegation and others leveled by the newspaper are "completely baseless and unjustified."

However, Alejandro added: "We understand that there may be an issue regarding compliance with the convention's own conflict of interest policy in this case, and the university will be working with the BGCT to resolve that matter."

The BGCT's policy states that convention-appointed trustees must not be related to the chief executive officer, chief financial officer, chief accounting officer or chief operating officer of the institutions they serve.

Duane Brooks, pastor of Tallowood Baptist Church in Houston, said Sept. 18 he was not aware of the convention's policy until he read the newspaper article. "It is now apparent that my continued service as a Baylor regent would not conform to BGCT guidelines," he said.

Brooks first was elected to the Baylor board by BGCT messengers in November 1999 and began serving June 1, 2000. David Brooks began work as the university's chief financial officer Oct. 1, 2000.

Duane Brooks emphasized that he excused himself from the discussion and vote on his brother's hiring, as well as every subsequent matter the board has approached that relates to his brother. "I am confident that no actual conflicts of interest have occurred," he said.

The pastor said that when he first learned of his brother's potential hiring, he "immediately offered to step down from the board to remove any possibility of a conflict of interest." However, Baylor's "administration and legal counsel" assured him his continued service was "desired and proper," Brooks said.

Allegations of regents' conflicts of interest are among a variety of issues to be investigated by a newly

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appointed committee of the regents.

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New pamphlet series challenges 'Baptist myths'

By John Pierce

(ABP) – Americans have a lot of "popular misconceptions and erroneous stereotypes" about Baptists, according to a group of historians. So three Baptist history groups have worked together to produce a series of pamphlets they say will shed light on Baptist beliefs and heritage.

The groups -- the Baptist History and Heritage Society, The Center for Baptist Studies of Mercer University and the Whitsitt Baptist Heritage Society -- worked cooperatively to produce the series titled "Baptist Myths." The pamphlets cite Baptist history to counter common perceptions about Baptists in popular American culture – such as anti-intellectual, racist, creationists.

One pamphlet addresses the perception that Baptists are anti-Catholic. Author John Finley, a pastor in Savannah, Ga., confesses in Myth: Baptists Are Anti-Catholic: "Candidly, Baptists at times have been anti-Catholic and Catholics have been anti-Baptist."

Finley ties the "rocky relationship over the past 400 years" to very different approaches to faith. In particular, he writes, "Baptists strongly believe in the sole authority of the Bible, personal conversion, simplified worship, local church autonomy and the separation of church and state."

Catholics, he notes, highly value the sacraments, find religious authority in both Scripture and tradition, practice liturgical forms of worship and have hierarchical governance. However, Finley points to signs of fallen prejudices and open communication between those who practice their faith in these two Christian traditions.

Doug Weaver of Baylor University is editor of the series. Associate editors are Charles Deweese and Walter Shurden.

Other titles and authors are: Myth: Baptists Are Anti-Ecumenical (Glenn Jonas), Myth: Baptists Are Anti-Intellectual (Rosalie Beck), Myth: Baptists Are Inerrantists (William Loyd Allen), Myth: Baptists Are Not Peacemakers (Paul R. Deka), Myth: Baptists Are Racists (Pamela R. Durso), Myth: Baptists Are Scientific Creationists (Phyllis Rodgerson Pleasants), Myth: Baptists Believe in Doctrinal Uniformity (Robert N. Nash Jr.), Myth: Baptists Don't Believe in Social Justice (Merrill M. Hawkins Jr.), Myth: Baptists Don't Believe in Women Pastors (Sheri Adams), Myth: Baptists Support State-Sponsored Prayer (Doug Weaver).

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'Leaky' church puzzles Alabama water company

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By Grace Thornton

LITTLEVILLE, Ala. (ABP) – The water bill at First Baptist Church was so high, the water department came by to look for a leak, but the pastor had another explanation.

"We realized the baptistry holds 900 gallons, and we've been seeing souls saved," explained Steve Amos, pastor of the Littleville church. The only "leak," he said, was the love of Christ leaking into the community.

When Amos came to Littleville in 2000, the church was withering. "Months passed, and we weren't seeing anyone saved," recalled the bivocational pastor and farmer. "I prayed God would work in someone's life," Amos told the Alabama Baptist. "Two weeks later, 10-year-old Gabe came forward and asked Christ to come into his life."

Since then, attendance has swelled from 25 to more than 125, and the baptistry has stayed full. The church has baptized 120 new Christians -- many of them children who followed Gabe's example -- and started ministries to shut-ins and those in retirement homes and jails. The youth group has grown from averaging 10 to more than 40.

"I've been there 20 years and I love what God is doing -- I'm enjoying it," said Dusty Daniel, deacon chair. "I was there when only 11 people were in services."

Daniel credits Amos' leadership and dedication for the newfound success, but the pastor has another explanation -- it's the "living" water. "God just used me as a vessel," Amos said.

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