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NEWS FROM ACROSS THE NATION



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Former SBC missionary confesses inappropriate contact with children

By Tony Cartledge

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RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- A former Southern Baptist missionary fired quietly seven years ago amid charges of child sexual abuse has written a public letter confessing several incidents of "sinful acts" early in his career.

In the wake of pedophilia scandals in the Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution June 12 calling attention to the "the sexual integrity of ministers."

Two days later, the head of the SBC International Mission Board met with former missionary children who claim first-hand knowledge of past abuse by **William "Mac" McElrath**, a missionary to Indonesia from 1967 to 1995. After the meeting, IMB President Jerry Rankin issued a statement acknowledging, "Our record in this area is not without blemish, and we are not immune from such problems."

Rankin's statement, released June 18 through Baptist Press, named McElrath as an example of "isolated cases of sexual abuse in the past." It cited a letter by McElrath written the previous day to members of his church, family and friends describing incidents that McElrath says happened prior to 1973.

In the letter, McElrath said none of the incidents involved sexual intercourse. "My sinful acts involved touching, tickling, cuddling, fondling that went too far," he wrote.

Rankin said that the IMB, based in Richmond, Va., now has "very strong" policies on sexual misconduct. Internal policies adopted a decade ago reflect a "zero-tolerance" on sexual offenses, Rankin said.

The news release said the missionary agency is currently "taking initiatives to provide additional counseling" to former missionary kids alleging sexual abuse.

"We are firmly committed to reaching out to victims and dealing decisively with violators," Rankin said. "We are engaged in an ongoing review of our policies regarding sexual misconduct, and we are committed to continuous training of our personnel in awareness and prevention of sexual misconduct."

IMB spokeswoman Wendy Norvelle told Religion News Service there were two or three other cases involving abuse of children in the past nine years but said she could not provide details. "If there is misconduct, termination is the result," she said.

A formal complaint in 1973 accused McElrath of fondling two children of missionaries. After review by field administrators, parents of the children and the McElraths, the IMB (then known as the Foreign Mission Board) determined the matter to be resolved among the concerned parties.

Following the conventional wisdom of the day, McElrath said, he followed counsel not to talk to any of the involved parties.

More than two decades later, however, a group of alleged victims came forward in January 1995 with information about other incidents they say occurred between 1967 and 1973.

After further investigation by IMB officials, McElrath reportedly admitted to the additional charges and was terminated. His wife, Betty, was allowed to take early retirement.

Since the alleged incidents had taken place more than 20 years earlier and in another country, no legal charges were filed.

McElrath said he wrote personal letters "to each person whom I thought I may have harmed, including grownup missionary children and their parents." There were 12 or 13 letters, he said, involving six missionary families. "I confessed my sin, apologized for my actions and begged forgiveness," he said.

Some of the alleged victims and their advocates, however, accuse McElrath of downplaying both the seriousness of his offenses and the number of children involved. They say that in order to demonstrate true remorse, the former missionary should remove himself from all contact with children.

After leaving the IMB, the McElraths moved to Raleigh, N.C., and joined Forest Hills Baptist Church there. McElrath insists there has been no additional misconduct since 1973. He says he told his pastor in confidence about his termination prior to joining the church and pledged not to accept any ongoing leadership responsibilities involving children or youth.

He and his wife have accepted periodic requests "to share with children or youth at church based on our experiences in music and missions," McElrath said, but always in public settings, with other adults present.

One member of the church, however, who requested anonymity, disputed that account. She told the Biblical Recorder that McElrath had spent unsupervised time with her children, but she was confident nothing inappropriate took place.

In a March 21 letter to ministerial staff and lay leaders at the Raleigh church, former missionary kid Eddy Ruble wrote "as a concerned sibling of one of his victims." Ruble said McElrath's quiet departure from the IMB has "allowed him to maintain his facade of being an upstanding member of the clergy--simply retired."

Ruble said McElrath should not be recognized as a "former" or "retired" missionary, but as a "terminated missionary."

"I have taken it on as my cause to try to put a stop to Mac's endangerment of children by informing those in supervisory roles in places and institutions where Mac McElrath places himself in contact with children," Ruble wrote.

Leaders at the church responded by formally banning McElrath from working with children of the church in any setting, mailing a letter about the issue to all members and arranging a dialogue session to address concerns.

Such efforts by Ruble and his wife, Cindy--along with five alleged victims and several supporters--also culminated in the June 14 meeting with Rankin, several top IMB officials and two lawyers. Ruble said the IMB arranged the meeting and paid the expenses for all participants, including three who traveled from Europe and the Middle East.

The delegation asked the IMB to make a public statement about McElrath's termination, provide counseling services for victims, actively seek other victims of abuse and tighten internal policies to discourage future acts of abuse.

"The only way to protect children is to break the silence," Cindy Ruble said in an interview, "to expose perpetrators at such a level that they can no longer be in a situation that could endanger children."

The Rubles said IMB officials promised to release a statement "within one or two weeks" of the meeting, after clearing it with alleged victims and their supporters. But the Rubles said the IMB statement released just days later included no input from the victims and downplayed their concerns about McElrath.

Three victims who are seeking financial restitution reportedly held a second meeting with IMB officials and legal counsel June 14. No details of the meeting have been released.

http://www.baptiststandard.com/2002/7_1/pages/mcelrath.html

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