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Missionary Resignations Down,
 But Reasons Still Complex

By Erich Bridges

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--For reasons as varied as their individual lives, some Southern Baptist foreign missionaries resign and return home.

Some hear God calling them back to ministry in the United States. Others come home to care for aging parents or children with special needs. Others simply buckle under the often crushing pressure of living, working and rearing a family in an alien culture.

For yet others, a tangle of nagging frustrations and conflicting commitments render effective ministry impossible, or so it seems.

The reasons for missionary resignations are as complex as they are varied, and defy quick, concise analysis.

One thing is certain, however. A smaller percentage of missionaries resigned in 1981, and Foreign Mission Board officials hope they are seeing a general downturn in the resignation rate, which in the early 1970s climbed above four percent.

In 1981, 114 missionaries resigned, or about 3.7 percent of the force of 3,123 career and associate missionaries and two-year journeymen.

"It's very difficult to pinpoint a single cause for a resignation," says Franklin Fowler, the board's medical consultant, who studies annual missionary losses. "There are so many factors involved. The missionaries themselves sometimes don't really know why they resign. We're dealing with a lot of subjectivity."

Change of "call" for example, led the reasons for resignation in Fowler's report for 1981, followed by problems in adjustment (to culture, language, living conditions), physical health problems and work frustration. Change of "call"--interpreted as a sense of God's leading back to the United States--typically leads the list from year to year. But while valid in its own right, the category often serves as a catch-all, according to Fowler.

"This may be the major reason when there are a lot of others, too," he explains. "Here's a missionary who's gone out and had a lot trouble getting the language, adjusting to the country and so forth. His folks back home keep writing and saying, 'We miss you so. We miss the grandchildren so. Why don't you come home?' His old church writes him and says, 'Our pastor just resigned, and we'd love to have you back.' All these things begin to pull, and he may conclude the Lord's leading him back to the States."

Yet change of "call" also emerges as a deeply felt sense of new direction, and personal progression among veteran and successful missionaries.

Though Fowler hesitates to identify a downward trend just yet, the 1981 resignation rate followed a general decrease begun in the late 1970s, after sharp increases earlier in that decade and in the mid-1960s. Resignations among career missionaries, who constitute

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almost 86 percent of the overseas force, numbered 95 in 1981, 3.41 percent of the total career force. The rate averaged better than 4 percent during the first half of the 1970s, more than double the average of a decade earlier. The average rate decreased to 3.78 percent in the latter half of the 1970s.

The career of a Southern Baptist foreign missionary completing service in the last two decades has averaged 14.4 years, considerably longer than that of the average American worker, who changes jobs every 5.4 years.

Winston Crawley, Foreign Mission Board vice president for planning, cites three factors for the missionary resignation increases of the 1960s and early 1970s: rapid overall personnel increases, the great emphasis on mobility and change in American society during the era, and the growing number of missionaries facing the "vulnerability factor."

The "vulnerability factor" often comes into the picture, Crawley says, when a missionary reaches middle age. "At that point his children are at an age when development problems come. His parents are moving into old age and often need special attention. The missionary is also at a mid-career point of re-evaluation, deciding what he wants to do with the rest of his life."

Fowler's 1981 study supports the "vulnerability" theory. Missionary resignations ranged highest between the end of the first and second terms, with another noticeable upturn coming after 15 to 19 years of service.

Missionaries also fall prey to special frustration during their second term on the field, Crawley says. Many return from furlough expecting the trials and tribulations of rookie days to have evaporated, when, in fact, they often increase.

No one area of the world consistently produces more resignations than other areas, and board staffers doubt that physical danger in violent or unstable countries scares away many missionaries.

"I think we have a significant number of missionaries who would walk into the jaws of hell itself to face a crisis situation," says Don Kammerdiener, area director for Middle America and the Caribbean, where political instability abounds. "I've seen them do it."

But the grinding tension of not knowing what may happen can wear down the most courageous outlook. "You can get through a month of revolution easier than four years of not knowing which way things will turn out, or who your friends are," Kammerdiener explains.

To help missionaries and their families cope with overseas pressures of all types, the Foreign Mission Board is devoting more time and money to "ministering to the ministers." The eight area directors and their associates strive to act as pastors to missionaries, providing personal counseling and listening ears. Family and marriage enrichment conferences and spiritual retreats are increasingly common events on mission fields. About 300 missionaries participated in Masterlife Discipleship training in 1981.

During furlough, missionaries are encouraged to upgrade professional and ministerial skills, and seek expert help to resolve problems developed on the field. Orientation staffers plan special, week-long debriefings to help missionaries returning from their first term to work through field frustrations.

In January, a uniform evaluation procedure went into effect in all missions (organizations of Southern Baptist missionaries on each foreign field), enabling missionaries to assess themselves and be assessed by their peers--near the end of each term, with an eye toward specific training during furlough.

Charles Bryan, vice president for overseas operations, sees methodical evaluation and continuing training as ways of affirming missionary strengths and strengthening the "soft spots."

"It's too early to link these things with the decrease in resignations in the last few years, but I think they'll measurably affect the loss rate in time, and increase years of service," he says.

Bryan also stresses that missionary "losses" through resignation aren't necessarily losses to missions. Former missionaries lead mission-minded churches, teach missions in seminaries, fill key positions on boards and agencies through the Southern Baptist Convention. Forty-one work on the Foreign Mission Board home office staff in Richmond. Hundreds of others serve churches and communities, ministering effectively in their daily lives.

In addition, 178 former missionaries were reappointed to mission service in the last 10 years, equaling 18 percent of career resignations for the same period. The average number of missionary reappointments almost doubled during the decade.

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(BP) illustrated graph mailed to Baptist state newspapers by Baptist Press Richmond bureau.

Former Missionary Aids
Laotians' Resettlement

By Jim Lowry

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)--Laotian refugees relocating in Nashville, Tenn. to escape the terrors of warfare in their homelands have become the missionary congregation today Benton Williams was forced to leave more than 12 years ago.

Williams, supervisor of pastoral ministries for the Baptist Sunday School Board, was a Southern Baptist missionary to Thailand from 1959-70, when he returned home because of a health problem.

Williams and his wife, Lib, questioned why it would turn out they must leave after they spent long hours daily for two years just to learn the language and customs of the Thais.

Early in 1980, needs of refugees arriving in Nashville prompted Williams to begin his ministry. It has grown into a congregation with approximately 125 members, sponsored by Belmont Heights Baptist Church.

On the last Sunday in January, a climactic point in the life of the Laotian congregation was reached when Williams baptized 37 persons after public decisions and several weeks of training in the Christian faith. The day before the baptismal service, Williams tested each of the Laotians' knowledge in areas such as God, prayer, Bible and the Christian life to be sure they understood the meaning of accepting Christ and baptism.

Williams started weekly services in April 1981 after holding monthly services for several months. He issued no invitation for public decisions until three months after weekly services were started.

During that first invitation, the oldest man in the congregation came forward to talk to Williams about the group. He wondered if Williams was going to stay and teach them about this new Christianity to which they were about to commit themselves, or did he plan to assume other jobs away from the refugees.

When Williams assured the man, who is the unofficial leader of the group, he intended to remain as pastor, members of the congregation started making public professions of faith.

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One of the refugees told Williams escaping to the United States was like being set free from slavery. In Laos, one of the men was a captain in the air force and another was a policeman. Most escaped through the jungles, coming to the U.S. after time in refugee camps.

For some, there was terror and heartbreak before leaving. One woman escaped with her daughters from Laos after seeing her husband shot and carried away for refusing to disclose to the army the location of his family.

Williams said these Laotian people had absolutely nothing when they arrived in the United States. Of the 25 families here, eight now have jobs and all live in government subsidized housing.

"Now is the time for these people to hear the gospel," Williams said. "I have the language so they do not have to wait until they can speak English."

The ministry that started as Sunday night English classes and Vacation Bible School for the children developed into an integral part of the refugees' community because Williams believed "They deserve to hear the gospel just like anyone else."

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(BP) photos mailed to Baptist state newspapers by Sunday School Board bureau of Baptist Press.

Baptist Pastor Named
To 'Special' Position

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DEL CITY, Okla. (BP)--John Lucas, pastor of Sunnyside Baptist Church, for the past 11 years, will be chaplain for the Oklahoma House of Representatives the week of March 15.

Although 15 or 20 Southern Baptist ministers will be House chaplain during the session, Lucas' service will be different. On March 16, President Ronald Reagan is scheduled to address a joint session of the Oklahoma Legislature in the House Chamber.

The Del City pastor will deliver the prayer opening the session and admits, "I am delighted. But I guess I will have a few butterflies because we will be with the President."

Anticipating the event, Lucas says, "My prayer will be to the Lord, not to the President."

Lucas noted that he does not plan to write his prayer prior to the session, but will probably collect his thoughts just before the event, and let the prayer write itself.

Lucas was selected because he is a long-time friend of State Rep. Jim Fried, whose parents are members of Sunnyside Church. Fried explained that as soon as he heard the date when the President was going to speak, he requested the privilege of selecting the chaplain.

"I was going to have Lucas out to the Capitol sometime during the session anyway," Fried explained.

As of the week of Feb. 25, Lucas had not been contacted by the Secret Service for security clearance. As a former policeman and a current member of the Oklahoma County Sheriff's Auxiliary Patrol, Lucas assumed the security clearance would be routine.

He makes no secret of his support of the President; "He is a great man. I voted for him, and I asked everybody I knew to vote for him. I like what he is doing."

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Two Films Withdrawn
From Baptist Centers

By Linda Lawson

NASHVILLE, Tenn., (BP)--Citing concern about potential damage to the ministries of Southern Baptist churches, Sunday School Board president Grady Cothen announced Baptist Film Centers will no longer distribute two films produced by Brigham Young University.

The films, "Cipher in the Snow" and "John Baker's Last Race," have been available through Broadman Films and Baptist Film Centers since 1975 and 1977, respectively. Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, is an institution of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons).

In addition to producing some inspirational films and all films on Baptist doctrine and polity, Broadman Films regularly purchases distribution rights on selected films from many producers.

Cothen said both films are inspirational in nature and neither contains any doctrinal content. They have been rented about 4,000 times through the film centers to churches and individuals.

"A survey of users shows almost unanimous support for the films," he said.

However the board's distribution of the films has recently been a target of a letter-writing protest campaign. Also, Cothen said, "We have received communications from responsible pastors who believe that any appearance of identification with sects is detrimental to their churches and their ministries."

In weighing the decision, Cothen said, "We are withdrawing the films in response to those thoughtful individuals who have a genuine problem with the fact that the films carry closing identification as having been produced by Brigham Young University."

He said some have expressed concern that Baptist distribution of the films appears to constitute endorsement of theology. "This is definitely not the case," said Cothen.

"The crux of this situation is our commitment to serving Southern Baptists and our churches in the most responsible and responsive way," Cothen emphasized. "We believe that the principle expressed in Romans 14 is one which we should follow. We have no desire to do anything by which our brother stumbles. Our task is burden-sharing not burden-creating."

"John Baker's Last Race" is the true story of a Methodist young adult training for the 1972 Olympics when he learned he had an incurable disease. The film highlights the last months of his life when he coached a group of elementary children, teaching them never to give up.

"Cipher in the Snow" uses the incident of a youth's death to show the universal need for love and compassion.

The remaining confirmed bookings of the films will be honored, Cothen said.

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