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CHARLOTTE, N.C.—Two missionary couples who lost their jobs with the Southern Baptist Convention for failure to sign a new faith statement expressed gratitude to God for allowing them to serve as missionaries at all.

Larry and Sarah Ballew and Houston and Charlotte Greenhaw told their stories at a breakfast meeting sponsored by the Mainstream Baptist Network June 27, but neither couple dwelled on the negative.

"We may have lost our jobs, but brothers and sisters, there are Christians who lose their lives ... for not bowing to heavy-handed authoritarianism," said Larry Ballew. He and his wife, who have served in Macau, China, were fired by the SBC's International Mission Board in May for failure to sign the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message.

The Greenhaws, veteran missionaries to Brazil, took early retirement from

the IMB when given a final ultimatum to sign the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message.

Charlotte Greenhaw spoke of her “gratitude to our awesome God” for allowing her to serve as a missionary. And despite the current challenges, she said, “I know the Lord is with me. I will not be afraid.”

“I have had joy that knows no limits, but I have had some moments in the last year (that were) ... very devastating,” added Greenhaw, who is a granddaughter of the legendary Edgar “Preacher” Hallock of Oklahoma.

The breakfast meeting, held during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's general assembly in Charlotte, N.C., linked information between the CBF and the SBC, the convention to which most CBF churches once belonged and to which some still relate. The Mainstream Baptist Network is a distinct organization from the CBF and seeks to foster what it calls “mainstream” Baptist ideals in churches and state Baptist conventions.

In the main hall of the CBF meeting, participants focused on their shared witness through the work of 149 CBF mission workers. At the Mainstream breakfast, attention focused on those who have been disaffected by the SBC but may not have joined the CBF.

Both the Ballews and the Greenhaws intend to return to their mission posts and continue the same work they were doing under the IMB, although with different support networks. Neither couple will be CBF-appointed missionaries.

Each couple explained why they refused to sign the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message.

“We did not do this to get your approval” but rather out of a sense of what was right in God's eyes, Ballew said.

Nor was the issue for him merely that the content of the SBC's faith statement had changed. He would have made the same decision if requested to sign the 1963 Baptist Faith & Message, he said.

Signing blind allegiance to a faith statement written by someone else in a different cultural context is “bad missiology” and a “bad witness,” he declared.

In China, “our people experience heavy-handed, top-down authoritarianism all the time,” he said. Signing “would have been a bad witness” to them.

“If we had signed that document, yes, we could have continued with the IMB. But it would have ruined us as missionaries.”

The choice was so clear even their 9-year-old son understood it when the ultimatum first was given to sign the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, Mrs. Ballew said. He said to his mother, “This reminds me of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,” referencing the three Hebrew teens who in ancient times were thrown into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar because they would not bow down to an idol.

The Greenhaws knew from the moment they received the IMB's request that they could not sign the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message, they each said.

“It was not my statement of faith,” Mrs. Greenhaw said.

Her husband held up a sheet of paper with 10 questions they were asked when first appointed as SBC missionaries. Then he read from the current affirmation required by the IMB, indicating agreement with the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message and pledging to work “in accordance with and not contrary” to it.

When first appointed, they were not asked to sign a specific faith statement written by someone else, he asserted. “The Baptist Faith & Message is

prepared in a U.S. context. To promise to work in accordance with something that is created in another culture—you can't do that.”

Holding up both pieces of paper, he declared, “The difference between these statements is immense.”

Both couples described how they believe God miraculously has provided a way for them to return to their mission fields, citing evidence such as unlikely encounters that led to new housing and just-in-time arrangements on visas.

Mrs. Ballew called it a “step of faith” that God has honored.

Neither couple expressed animosity toward the IMB, although both acknowledged the trauma of the past year and a half.

Ballew quoted the Apostle Paul's words from the eighth chapter of Romans to say of God: “These present sufferings are nothing compared to the glory he will reveal in us.”

He added: “Every temporary problem is an opportunity for the glory of the Lord to shine out.”

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