

Former IMB administrator, MasterLife creator, diagnosed with leukemia

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BELLA VISTA, Ark. (ABP) — Avery Willis, a former Southern Baptist missionary and administrator best known as developer of the MasterLife discipleship materials used around the world, has been diagnosed with a rare form of leukemia.

Willis, who retired in 2004 as senior vice president of the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, said in a Jan. 6 prayer newsletter that a doctor told him he likely has one of two types of the disease. Depending on which type, he said, the average life expectancy after diagnosis ranges from six months to four years.



Avery and Shirley
Willis reside in
retirement in Bella
Vista, Ark.

Willis said doctors planned additional DNA testing on a bone-marrow

biopsy taken the week before to determine whether to proceed with treatment for [chronic monocytic leukemia](#) or the more problematic [chronic myelomonocytic leukemia](#).

Willis, who lives with his wife, Shirley, in Bella Vista, Ark., now [works](#) as executive director of the International Orality Network, a partnership of mission organizations using oral methods to evangelize and disciple the roughly 70 percent of the world's population that is functionally illiterate.

An Arkansas native, Willis served as a missionary in Indonesia for 14 years before returning to the United States in 1978. While serving as president of the Indonesia Baptist Seminary, he created an intensive small-group discipleship study process named MasterLife.

During 15 years he worked as head of adult discipleship programs for what is now known as LifeWay Christian Resources, MasterLife became a staple of Sunday night and midweek Bible study groups in Southern Baptist churches. It also was translated into 50 languages and used in 100 countries around the world.

In 2008 Willis was one of six candidates nominated as president of the Southern Baptist Convention in an election won on the first ballot by current SBC President Johnny Hunt, who himself is scheduled soon to undergo surgery for prostate cancer.

Willis recently was invited to give input to a Great Commission Task Force appointed last June by Hunt to study ways to make the Southern Baptist Convention's church-planting and missionary efforts more effective.

Willis said his doctors have been trying for six months to discover what caused a low white blood cell count that spiked to 10 times what it should be. In his regular January 2010 prayer later he [reported](#) excruciating pain in the hips that had been going on for three weeks.

He is seeking admission to [M. D. Anderson Cancer Center](#) for treatment.

Willis asked supporters to pray for his healing if that is God's will and for a successor at the International Orality Network and other causes with which he is involved.

"In the midst of your concern for me I want you to compare my situation with the 4 billion oral learners who haven't heard and don't understand the Words of Life," he concluded. "At least 1.5 billion people have never heard of Jesus. They are the ones who need our attention and prayers."

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.