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IMB postpones volunteer trips through June 30; personnel 'shelter in place'

by Julie McGowan, posted Wednesday, March 25, 2020 (one month ago)

RICHMOND, Va. (BP) -- International Mission Board senior leaders have directed IMB missionary personnel around the world to postpone hosting any ministry volunteer groups through June 30, leaders announced Wednesday (March 25). The directive will be reassessed May 1.



"We're instructing our personnel to postpone all volunteer efforts at this time due to the uncertainty of health and travel for those traveling internationally, and also to comply with the State Department's guidance," said IMB President Paul Chitwood. "We strongly recommend that Southern Baptist volunteer teams postpone any travel during this time, particularly overseas travel."

Chitwood said setting a parameter about volunteer teams is a complex issue because of the global nature of the virus, including with the United States being greatly impacted and movement becoming more restricted.

"We highly value all our field personnel and their partners -- our long-term personnel; our mid-term personnel, including Journeyman; and the faithful mission volunteers," Chitwood said. "Throughout this situation, we are continually assessing local situations in the context of the global crisis and doing our best, at both the local and global levels, to make good decisions for our personnel's health and safety, and for those who desire to serve alongside us as volunteers for a shorter time."

"Ministry overseas, however, hasn't stopped as many of our missionaries are making the same efforts to move to online discipleship training and other types of meetings to ensure that Southern Baptists' work and witness among the nations remains strong."

Chitwood said every Southern Baptist and other partners have an opportunity to support missions now, even while being restricted in their travel, by committing to a concerted time of prayer.

"We believe that prayer not only paves the way for the Lord to work, but following Jesus' example, we know that prayer itself is, in fact, part of that vital work," Chitwood said. "What an incredible opportunity to step into the gap for millions of unreached people while our eyes are on the condition of the world."

Prayer requests on IMB.org/Pray provide a window on the world, and IMB leaders urge those who are committed to prayer to join IMB's 175 Days of Prayer, planned for May 11-Nov. 29, 2020, at IMB.org/175.

Olympics volunteers affected

The postponement of the 2020 Summer Olympics is affecting volunteers planning to share the gospel and serve other ways through the international event in Japan. IMB's Olympic ministry coordinators shared a message online as well as through a YouTube video for those volunteers.

"We want you to know that the IMB and our partners here in Japan are still committed to the Tokyo Olympics [when they take place]," said Daniel Rice, who is coordinating IMB's 2020 Olympic ministries. Between now and then, "our team will continue working hard to keep things moving forward in order to bring the good news of the Gospel to the Japanese. We will make the necessary adjustments to continue our [ministry] plan when the Olympics take place. Our hope is that many of you will be able to join us."

"In the meantime, we ask that you continue to pray for the Japanese people. Many Japanese may feel disappointed and are even concerned that the Olympics' postponement reflects negatively on them as a nation."

Rice offered several prayer requests for Southern Baptists:

-- Pray that COVID-19 would be contained worldwide and that people of all nations can gather and celebrate the Olympics.

-- Pray that during this time, local Japanese churches would gain a greater excitement for opportunities to minister during the Olympics that will lead to more involvement and partnership when the Olympics are held.

-- Pray for the athletes in Japan and around the world who may be discouraged by the delay of the Olympic Games.

Field personnel follow guidelines

IMB leaders have received questions about the status of field personnel who live full time overseas: long-term personnel and mid-term personnel, including Journeymen. In most cases, field leaders have determined that missionaries remaining at their current location is the best option for their health and safety. In specific cases where personnel have medical conditions such as chronic respiratory ailments or pregnancy and live in locations with substandard medical care, IMB offered the option to temporarily relocate, as they are able to travel, to areas with better medical care.

The U.S. State Department has issued this guidance: "The Department of State advises U.S. citizens to avoid all international travel due to the global impact of COVID-19. In countries where commercial departure options remain available, U.S. citizens who live in the United States should arrange for immediate return to the United States, unless they are prepared to remain abroad for an indefinite period. U.S. citizens who live abroad should avoid all international travel."

Because IMB's long-term and mid-term field personnel, including Journeyman units, live overseas, the missionaries are following the State Department's guidance for them to "shelter in place." The State Department's Global Level 4 Health Advisory announcement of March 19 is not interpreted as a requirement or encouragement for personnel who live abroad to return to the U.S.

IMB leaders encourage concerned families to communicate directly with their field personnel as they are able to get the most up-to-date information directly about their family members.

"We remain committed to our mission to serve Southern Baptists in carrying out the Great Commission to make disciples of all nations," Chitwood said. "While this global crisis raises many uncertainties, we remain steadfast in our belief that the Lord will fulfill the vision of a multitude from every language, people, tribe and nation knowing and worshiping our Lord Jesus Christ (Revelation 7:9). And we remain grateful for the opportunities He provides for us to join Him in fulfilling that vision."

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