

Belgium Arrests And Deports Four U.S. Missionaries

The Assemblies of God workers were expelled because of a new Belgian law

Belgium arrested and quickly expelled four Assemblies of God (AG) workers in February in an apparent act of approval for a national law that narrows the legal boundaries of missionary activity in the nation. A fifth worker, arrested with the four, was ordered to leave the country within five days.

The four, all young women, were volunteers serving the denomination on a "faith-support basis," according to Greg Mundis, European regional director of the AG World Missions Division.

"[They] were deported because of violating a work-permit law passed by the Belgium government in 1999," Mundis said. "To our knowledge, this law states that missionaries serving outside the pulpit and church ministry are required to have work permits."

On Feb. 7, labor inspectors and police officers came to church facilities associated with the International Christian Academy (ICA) and International Media Ministries (IMM) in Rhode Saint-Genese, Belgium. They checked identification papers and took seven women to the police station for questioning.

Four of the women spent the night in a detention center and were deported to New York City the next day. They were identified as Kristi Hoggard of Springfield, Mo.; Trista Logering of Cape Coral, Fla.; Bonnie Dyess, of Garland,

Texas—who all are missionary associates with the AG World Missions program—and a volunteer, Julia Ryser, of Tulsa, Okla.

The other three women were released the day of their arrest, and one of them was ordered to leave the country within five days.

Two weeks later, AG ministry directors in Belgium received a citation from the country's Department of Labor stating that all identification papers checked during the inspection were in violation of the work-permit law. "We thought it was just going to be an issue of only five who didn't have work permits," said Gerald Branum, area director for Western Europe. "It is now an issue affecting 27 more of our missionaries."

According to Branum, Belgium's high number of illegal workers has pressed the Labor Department to tighten work-permit requirements. The AG ministries came under scrutiny when a labor inspector visited ICA in November to check on an employee of the school. During the visit, the inspector asked for a list of volunteers working at the school (only janitorial staff were paid).

"To us, it was a routine labor inspection as we've had in the past," Branum said.

What had changed, however, was that the labor department had begun to apply a strict interpretation of the 1999 law, which allows work-permit exemptions only to "ministers of public worship." The law excludes less traditional missionary ministry, such as teaching and religious media work. It requires any missionary who is not regularly administering

public worship to have a work permit.

“From our perspective, there was no question of anyone needing a work permit,” Branum said. “To have a work permit, one has to be an employee of a Belgium company with a salary coming from Belgium. None of our missionaries are employees of the mission, but are living from gifts from churches in the United States. So while the law requires us to have a work permit, it doesn’t qualify us for one.”

At press time, AG lawyers were meeting with Belgium government officials hoping to negotiate a resolution. Until one is reached, ICA has been temporarily closed, and the parents of the 35 students attending the school have had to find other educational options. The IMM building also has been temporarily closed.

“The Assemblies of God Europe Region is committed to walking in truth and integrity with the governments where we have works,” Mundis said. “Our personnel love Belgium and the Belgian population, including the authorities. We are praying for the country. Our desire is to find a way to work through this situation that will respect the Belgian government, honor God and enable us to work on completing our mission.”

The AG has had missionary involvement in Belgium since 1949 and currently has 75 missions personnel in the country.

Jeff Slaughter in Belgium