

Alliance of Baptists to appeal U.S. fine for Cuban travel: Insists trips involved "full-time religious activity"

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The Alliance of Baptists plans to appeal a Treasury Department notice alleging that churches affiliated with the group violated rules regarding travel to Cuba and should be fined \$34,000.

The notice, dated July 5, said itineraries of five churches that used the alliance's travel license "did not reflect a program of full-time religious activity."

The Treasury Department in 2005 suspended the alliance's license after accusing workers from at least one church of using the license for "sightseeing and beach time." Officials from the moderate Baptist group maintained that their activities were legitimate.

The recent notification, emerging from a second investigation, said the alliance should also be fined. The actions come at a time when the Bush administration has been tightening sanctions against Cuba, including blocking humanitarian aid from reaching the Cuban Council of Churches.

Stan Hasty, executive director of the Washington-based alliance, said a majority of the group's board members have asked him to send a written response appealing the notice from the department's Office of Foreign Assets Control.

Hasty said the "pre-penalty notice" arose from an investigation of churches that traveled to Cuba between 2003 and 2005. "We're told that they engaged in substantial tourist activities and that's simply not the case," he said. "They engaged, by any reasonable definition, in programs of full-time religious activity."

He said the purpose of a stay at a beach resort with ties to a religious group was to visit a church, not to go to the beach. He said the participating churches met with partner churches in Cuba, attending worship services and visiting homes in nearby

communities. The alliance intended to file its written appeal by early this month.

The alliance, which includes 117 U.S. churches, is among religious organizations that have been affected by recent regulation changes by the Treasury office and are no longer permitted to travel to Cuba.

When asked for details about the notice received by the alliance, Treasury Department spokesperson Molly Millerwise said the department does not “comment on individual cases.” She was not aware of any religious groups that previously had been fined. *-Religion News Service*