

Missionary & SBTC leader face off for SBC first VP

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By Greg Warner

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SAN ANTONIO—A missionary to Spain and the leader of the fundamentalist state convention in Texas each will be nominated for first vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention June 12.

If missionary David Rogers, son of legendary preacher and former SBC President Adrian Rogers, is elected, he will be the first active missionary to hold SBC office.

Rogers, a church-planter and mobilization coordinator in Madrid, will face Jim Richards, executive director of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, in a showdown over competing visions for the SBC's future.

Although Southern Baptist president Frank Page is expected to be re-elected without serious opposition during the June 12-13 convention in San Antonio, the contest for first vice president amounts to a referendum on the movement Page represents.

Rogers supports the movement—largely led by his father, deceased pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church near Memphis—which wrested control of the

SBC from theological moderates.

But lately Rogers, a prolific blogger (www.loveeachstone.blogspot.com), has spoken out against the increasingly narrow agenda of the movement's current leaders, whom critics say have tightened the criteria for missionaries, trustees and other leaders well beyond the SBC's doctrinal parameters.

"I believe the 'conservative resurgence' was very positive and even necessary development in the SBC," Rogers said in an e-mail interview. "However, I believe that certain sectors from among those generally considered to support the 'conservative resurgence' have indeed taken things a bit further than what was originally envisioned on the part of some key leaders, including, I believe, my father."

Page was elected on a promise to broaden SBC leadership to include inerrantists who differ on non-essential doctrines, such as speaking in tongues, Calvinism and the administration of baptism.

Rogers said he is "very pleased with the direction that Frank Page has given to the SBC during this past year, and quite positively impressed by his winsome, irenic spirit, solid biblical convictions on the things that really matter, and his commitment to 'major on the majors' without excluding those who differ on tertiary issues from fair and equitable representation in SBC-affiliated entities and ministries."

David Dykes, pastor of Green Acres Baptist Church in Tyler, Texas, announced June 5 he will nominate Rogers.

"I believe a convention that is serious about missions should have a missionary leading us," Dykes said. "Southern Baptists need a new vision to plant churches. Who better than an experienced church-planter to lead this effort?"

Dykes' Tyler congregation is the nation's largest contributor to the SBC's unified budget, the Cooperative Program.

"We can give all the money in the world, but budget percentages don't plant churches," Dykes said. "Missionaries plant churches, and if it weren't for field missionaries like David Rogers, we wouldn't have a Cooperative Program to start with."

If elected, Rogers apparently would be the first active missionary to hold SBC office, according to the two mission boards. Although rare, it is not against SBC bylaws for an employee of the Southern Baptist Convention to serve in denominational office. Most recently, Southwestern Seminary President Paige Patterson served two terms as SBC president.

Rogers said he will not be in San Antonio for the convention, but supporters say it is not necessary for his election. It is necessary for officers to be members of Southern Baptist churches. A news release about Rogers' candidacy said he and his family are "field members of Iglesia Bautista Buen Pastor in Madrid, Spain," but their "home membership" remains at Bellevue Baptist Church.

Vice presidents have very limited power in the SBC structure, but they are the only ones instructed by SBC bylaws to advise the president in his appointments to convention leadership. They also have a platform to speak out on Baptist issues, if they choose.

Rogers said he would advise Page to "continue as he has started during this first year," emphasize revival and practice humility.

"I would also counsel him to do whatever possible to reach out, with a view towards healing and reconciliation, to those in SBC life who, for whatever reason, are perceived to be at odds with each other, without compromising on biblical essentials," Rogers said.

Jim Richards will be nominated for first vice president by Mac Brunson, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla., it was announced June 1. Richards is the founding director of the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention and an ardent supporter of the SBC's fundamentalist movement and its recent leaders.

The Southern Baptists of Texas Convention is an SBC-friendly convention that arose eight years ago as an alternative to the moderate-dominated Baptist General Convention of Texas. The SBTC, based in Grapevine, is composed of 1,888 churches. It leads all state conventions in proportionate SBC giving, allocating 54 percent of its budget to the SBC.

Asked about Page's presidency and his intention to expand representation, Richards said: "For some years now, SBC presidents have sought to bring diversity into the process. People who have never served, younger people, ethnics, African-Americans are just examples of those who have been appointed. To my knowledge, President Page has stayed true to the doctrinal standards used by the presidents of the past number of years."

Richards declined to say if the conservative movement has gone too far in narrowing doctrinal parameters.

"The Baptist Faith & Message 2000 is the doctrinal statement of the Southern Baptist Convention," he said in an e-mail interview. "There is great latitude within the statement. ... Southern Baptists will continue to define themselves. As doctrinal issues arise, they will be addressed to help clarify what is representative of Southern Baptists."

As for the advice he would give the SBC president, he said: "Dr. Page has called upon us to seek God for a spiritual awakening. He is to unveil a 10-year evangelism strategy. I would encourage him to stay the course on both of these objectives. He has provided us with gentle, spirited leadership."

Richards is a member of First Baptist Church of Fort Worth, made famous

by former pastor and fundamentalist pioneer J. Frank Norris, who broke away from the SBC in the 1920s over theological issues and the “modernist” controversy.

Norris was the only individual ever denied participation in a Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. The church reaffiliated with the SBC in recent years and now gives 12.3 percent of its undesignated receipts to the SBC.

A native of Louisiana, Richards was a pastor in Louisiana and director of missions in Arkansas before joining the SBTC. He served in several SBC-level positions, including a spot as chairman of the Christian Life Commission, now the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission.

Brunson, before moving to Jacksonville, was pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, which is affiliated with the SBTC.

Two candidates have announced plans to be nominated for second vice president —evangelist Bill Britt, a member of College Heights Baptist Church in Gallatin, Tenn., and Eric Redmond, pastor of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Temple Hills, Md.