

Missionary Rebekah Naylor plans to retire—again

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Rebekah Naylor, a longtime missionary surgeon, retired the first time in 2002 and came home to Texas after 35 years in India to care for her mother, who was ailing.

Along with doing that, she joined the faculty at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, where she taught surgery eight years.

She later became a consultant for Southern Baptist global relief and development work, taught at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and helped her church start a health clinic in Fort Worth.

This fall, the 79-year-old Naylor will retire again, stepping down from her role at the Southern Baptist Convention’s International Mission Board, where she’s helped promote medical missions around the world.

Now, for the first time in 50 years, she plans to take a proper break.

Not bad for someone who, as a teenager, never wanted to leave home and who was overwhelmed when she felt God’s calling on her life.

“Even going to college seemed like a mountain to me,” said Naylor in a recent interview, looking back over her career. “So how could I be a medical missionary?”

Mixture of faith and tenacity

But once she makes up her mind—especially about something she believes

God wants her to do—almost nothing stands in her way. That combination of faith and tenacity has served her well.

Following that call to missions, Naylor, the daughter of a Baptist preacher turned seminary president, graduated from Baylor University, then went to medical school at Vanderbilt, where she was told women were not welcome in surgery.

But a missionary surgeon in Thailand, whom she met while visiting that country as a medical student, believed in her. While the faculty at the medical school thought her hopes of becoming a surgeon were a lost cause, she said, this missionary did not.

“I got to help him a lot in the operating room and discovered that I loved surgery,” she said. “It was really that experience that made me go back to medical school that fourth year and tell the faculty I was going to be a surgeon.”



Dr. Rebekah Naylor checks on patients at Bangalore Baptist Hospital in this September 1983 file photo. Altogether, Naylor spent nearly 30 years serving patients at the hospital as well as overseeing the 1996 construction of the

Rebekah Ann Naylor School of Nursing. (Photo courtesy of Don Rutledge, IMB)

After finishing her training, Naylor was assigned to a fledgling hospital in Bangalore, India, which had opened with 40 beds and a small staff outside the city limits. Over the years, the hospital expanded to 400 beds, a large staff and an attached nursing school.

Naylor went from being a staff doctor to medical director to CEO, treating thousands of patients and delivering a host of babies while doubling as the hospital's only OB-GYN for years. She also ended up training many of the staff who now run the hospital.

"We grew up together," she said, referring to her long relationship with the hospital and the people who work there.

Along the way, there were struggles, including conflict with the Indian government and a decision by the SBC's International Mission Board to sell the hospital in the late 1980s. The mission board was moving away from running institutions such as hospitals because of the costs involved.

"That came as a shock," she said. "And of course, with a lot of sadness."

Selling the hospital proved difficult, Naylor said, because it was so valuable no one could afford it. Eventually, she helped negotiate an agreement with Christian Medical College, a school founded by missionaries in the early 1990s that educates health care professionals.

God made a way for the hospital to continue to grow and thrive, said Naylor, who as leader had a knack for getting things done and the ability to adapt when things did not go the way she planned.

"We were always moving forward," she said. "I was a planner. But very

much trusting God to just show us what those next steps could be.”

Inspiration to others

Naylor’s long service and can-do attitude helped inspire other medical professionals to put their training to work in missions, said Rick Dunbar, an emergency room doctor and former chair of the IMB’s board of trustees. Dunbar called Naylor both a friend and one of his heroes.



In recent years, he said, the two have worked together in promoting the mission board’s medical work. Dunbar said he’s been inspired by her ability to focus and her dedication to living out her faith.

“After she discerns God’s will for her, she pursues it with a bulldog tenacity,” he said.

Along with that tenacity comes a tenderness, he said, and care for the people she works with. And a desire to help others see how they can live out their faith. He described Naylor as magnetic—attracting people to her and inspiring them to join in the work.

In the 1990s, she stepped down as CEO of the hospital and turned that role over to an Indian leader. Then she stayed on staff, serving as his No. 2 leader. It took a while for the staff to adjust, she said. But when someone asked her a question, she deferred and pointed them to the new CEO. Doing so was essential for the hospital’s future, she said.

“I very much wanted the hospital to have a long life,” she said. “And if it were going to have a long life, it had to have strong local leadership.”

Even after coming home in 2002, Naylor stayed involved with the hospital, making frequent visits to Bangalore Baptist Hospital and the people she loves.

“Bangalore is, even now, a second home, and I’ve been able to return frequently,” she told Baylor’s alumni magazine in 2022 when the university honored her service to the church. “It’s the people, the relationships. Bangalore is very significant in my life.”



Paul Chitwood, president of the International Mission Board, announces a health care ministries fund named in honor of Dr. Rebekah Naylor, veteran medical missionary and hospital administrator. (IMB Photo)

Naylor was recognized during an IMB event at the recent Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, where IMB President Paul Chitwood noted her medical service and her strategic work in helping Indian pastors start hundreds of churches.

“Her work and her life speak for themselves,” Chitwood told RNS in an email. “She has been a proponent of the gospel of grace and physical and spiritual healing for the people of South Asia for more than 50 years.”

Naylor said she is hopeful for the future of medical missions. There's still a need for hospitals, she said, but also for clinics and other health care options. Health care professionals have a host of opportunities to teach doctors, nurses and other health care workers around the world. And missionaries can also help with providing mental health services.

"This is a huge crisis worldwide," she said, adding that missionaries have long provided care for those who have no other options.

In retirement, Naylor said she hopes to find more time to play the piano, especially the music of Bach, one of her favorite composers. She also hopes to read; to travel for pleasure, rather than for work; and to spend time with her friends. She'll also help out at her church, teaching a Bible study and helping oversee the church's health clinic.