

Open mission positions may be “God moment,” says SBC task force chair

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ROGERS, Ark. — Impending vacancies in the top leadership positions of the Southern Baptist Convention’s two mission boards offer unique opportunities for the denomination as it considers new ways to engage its mission enterprise, says the chair of a task force examining how the SBC should most effectively structure its missionary and funding mechanisms.

The Sept. 16 announcement that Jerry Rankin will retire in July 2010 as president of the International Mission Board — preceded weeks earlier by the resignation of Geoff Hammond as president of the North American Mission Board — could represent a “God moment,” said Ronnie Floyd of Rogers, Ark., chair of the SBC’s Great Commission Resurgence task force.

“We have a unique moment in our history, with both of the boards not having a leader,” said Floyd in an interview the day after Rankin’s announcement. “No one anywhere would have thought that — especially those of us on the GCR task force. All Southern Baptists have to ask ourselves one question — is God saying anything to us in all this? I don’t know that he is. I’m sure he’s speaking to us, but what he’s saying, I don’t know.

“All I can say is that I believe it is a God moment, whatever that might mean,” said Floyd, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Springdale and the Church at Pinnacle Hills, both in Northwest Arkansas.

Last June, the SBC authorized its president, Johnny Hunt, to appoint a task force to study how the denomination can work “more faithfully and

effectively together in serving Christ through the Great Commission.” The 23-member panel, which held its first meeting Aug. 11-12, is to bring a report and any recommendations to the 2010 SBC annual meeting, June 15-16 in Orlando, Fla.

Although task force members have declined to discuss topics raised at their meetings, which are closed to the public, some outside the committee have proposed merging the convention’s mission boards; revamping the SBC’s 85-year-old unified giving plan, the Cooperative Program, to channel more funds to national and international mission; and offering SBC churches greater flexibility in supporting denominational causes.

Floyd said that as IMB president, Rankin has played a pivotal role in creating a “culture” in which greater emphasis can be given to the Great Commission — Jesus’ instructions to spread his teachings to the world, recorded at the end of the Gospel of Matthew.

“Dr. Rankin is a walking Great Commission Resurgence for the Southern Baptist Convention,” said Floyd. “He represents everything that we’re involved in right now, trying to create ways for this convention to develop a new commitment to the Great Commission. So the loss of his leadership is great to this denomination.”

In comments following his retirement announcement, Rankin said encouraging local churches to take greater ownership of their mission task was the most significant accomplishment of his tenure at the IMB. Through a board reorganization in the late-1990s and a more far-reaching one earlier this year, he said he sought to “multiply [SBC] resources and people by mobilizing our churches [and] by personalizing their involvement.”

Floyd’s churches - actually one congregation on two campuses - are themselves characteristic of the more flexible approach to engaging mission that gave impetus to the GCR task force’s appointment. A world

mission conference hosted by the congregation Sept. 20-23 will feature almost 60 missionaries representing 29 ministries in Arkansas and the United States and around the globe.

“I have nothing but the highest respect for [Rankin],” said Floyd, “and I believe our group shares that respect. ... When he launched the reorganization in the 1990s, that changed things in remarkable ways, especially in his commitment to personalization of missions for churches. And now the newest restructuring is creative and it is right, because we do live in a flat world. That is cutting edge.”

Floyd declined to speculate on a merger of the mission boards or the creation of a new entity to replace them. In a Sept. 16 press conference, Rankin said he likely wouldn't support a merger, though consideration of a “common mission effort through a new entity that is neither the IMB nor the NAMB” might have merit.

The timing of Rankin's retirement won't appreciably affect the GCR task force's work or accelerate its decision-making, Floyd said.

“The fact is, right now everything [occurring in the SBC] affects our work,” he said, adding, “We're under a June deadline regardless because that is what the SBC has instructed us to do.”

But he repeated that the next nine months offer the denomination a window of opportunity.

“God has given us a moment from now to June,” he said. “When I stand before Jesus and when the convention stands before Christ, what we did with this moment [will be important]. I don't want to hold my head in shame or the convention to hold its head in shame.”

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