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Rankin elected FMB president
despite opposition on tongues

By Greg Warner

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Missionary Jerry Rankin was elected president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board June 14 over the objections of some trustees who said his charismatic leanings would be divisive to Southern Baptists' worldwide outreach efforts.

In a special called meeting in Houston, one day prior to the start of the annual Southern Baptist Convention in that city, FMB trustees voted 59-14 to elect Rankin, a missionary/administrator from Singapore and 23-year missions veteran.

Trustees debated Rankin's nomination during a three-and-a-half-hour closed-door meeting. In the public roll-call vote that followed, opposition trustees fell five votes short of the 25 percent necessary to block Rankin's election.

Debate during the executive session focused on Rankin's "personal theology and practice of spiritual gifts," search chairman Joel Gregory told reporters afterward. The issue was "fully ventilated," Gregory said. "We fully accept his explanation."

Rankin, 51, admits to "praying in the Spirit," considered by most charismatics to be a private use of the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues. He also acknowledges interpreting, or translating, a message spoken in tongues during a public worship service in Singapore, where he serves as area director for the FMB's 480 missionaries in Southern Asia and the Pacific.

But Rankin insists he is not a charismatic and not part of the modern charismatic movement, which encourages tongues-speaking as evidence of the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Gregory said the search committee was likewise convinced Rankin's private prayer experiences "would not fall into the category of unknown ecstatic utterances," commonly known as tongues.

Many Southern Baptists discount all evidence of tongues, dismissing the modern phenomenon of tongues-speaking as either no longer a valid spiritual gift or something different from the biblical accounts of tongues-speaking, which some say refer only to specific, intelligible languages.

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Initially, Rankin's May 25 nomination to the FMB post seemed almost assured, buoyed by endorsements from top Southern Baptist leaders. But questions about his charismatic leanings surfaced in the days leading up to the called meeting, drawing the ire of the FMB's most conservative trustees.

The search committee was preoccupied with the charismatic charges in recent days. "It was almost the only thing we have talked about," one committee member said.

Rankin was pressured to withdraw before the vote, sources said, and the search committee likewise was asked to postpone the election. A motion to postpone was voted down during the closed-door session.

According to several trustees, there were enough negative votes at the start of the closed session to block the election. But Rankin himself swung the vote, according to search committee member Leon Hyatt of Louisiana.

"He spoke forthrightly on the charismatic issue and convinced a majority of trustees that he is not charismatic and is opposed to the modern charismatic movement but is very interested in being filled with the Holy Spirit and very committed to winning the world to Jesus," Hyatt said.

Most trustees spoke highly of Rankin's spiritual devotion and commitment to missions, saying only his views on tongues caused them pause.

In the end, trustees voted to make the election unanimous. Paul Pressler of Houston, who voted against Rankin, offered that motion, which was greeted by standing applause by the trustees. Most seemed willing to work with their new president despite the dispute.

Rankin's election is expected to meet with the approval most of the FMB's 3,953 missionaries, many of whom feared the committee would turn to someone with no missionary experience. Although not involved in SBC politics, Rankin is sympathetic to the cause of SBC conservatives and committed to biblical inerrancy, the pivotal issue in their struggle for control of the SBC.

Although those opposed to Rankin were among the FMB's most conservative trustees, Gregory said before the vote he was "in no position to judge" the political nature of the opposition to Rankin.

The vote concluded 14 months of work by the 15-member search committee, which was charged with selecting a successor to Keith Parks, who retired three years earlier than he previously planned because of philosophical differences with trustees.

The committee first offered the job to Oklahoma pastor Tom Elliff, a former missionary and leader in the 14-year-old SBC conservative movement. But Elliff twice turned down the committee's offer.

Rankin was one of the early candidates for the job, said search chairman Gregory of Dallas. But "other factors," not Rankin's charismatic leanings, persuaded the committee to pass him over after his initial interview more than a year ago, Gregory said. He said Rankin was seen as an FMB "insider," and the committee was looking for fresh faces.

However, committee member Hyatt told trustees the committee initially shied away from Rankin because "we had heard rumors that Jerry had had on occasion, in his private prayer life, experiences we couldn't understand."

The committee concluded, however, that Rankin's beliefs are "not outside the bounds of Southern Baptists," Hyatt said. The nominee's prayer experiences were "personal and private," Hyatt said, and he is "not part of a movement that places emphasis on bizarre experiences."

Hyatt was the only one of the 14 committee members to address the charismatic issue during the committee's hour-long presentation of the nomination June 14.

Hyatt urged trustees to put the charismatic matter in perspective. "Consider the 23 years he has served as a faithful, successful missionary," he said. Trustees should be pleased they would have a deeply spiritual president guided by the Holy Spirit "instead of just corporate administrative methods."

Other committee members, explaining their unanimous choice, cited Rankin's deep spirituality and devotion to prayer, an emphasis they suggested was missing from the previous administration. Hoyt Savage said Rankin would bring a balance of the spiritual and objective to FMB decision-making.

Several committee members sobbed in recalling the group's own spiritual journey to arrive at the conviction that Rankin should be the nominee. "This man knows the Lord like nobody I've ever known," said Phyllis Randali of Virginia.

Reed Lynn of Oklahoma, in an apparent allusion to the charismatic question, urged fellow trustees to "follow your faith and not your fears."

Rankin was visibly moved by the testimonies, which were offered before the trustees went into executive session.

Allowed to address trustees, he outlined several broad principles that would guide his administration if elected:

- Focus on responsive mission areas -- "those harvest fields that God has ripened" -- without neglecting so-called World A, the one-fourth of the world that has never heard the gospel.

- Streamline the FMB's administrative structure.

- Give missionaries more influence in developing FMB strategies, "with little direction from Richmond," Rankin said. "Because we are trying to reach a world that is diverse, we cannot have one global strategy."

- Continue the FMB's devotion to "indigenous missions" -- in which nationals and not missionaries control the churches in a country -- but with increased emphasis on missionary-generated strategies. "Indigeneity does not mean passivity," he explained.

- Use more volunteers and other non-traditional channels for world evangelization, answering a criticism of many trustees about current FMB practice.

The FMB has constructed "too narrow a funnel through which Southern Baptists can work through the Foreign Mission Board," he said. "A theme I hope you will be hearing a lot in the future is 'The Foreign Mission Board: Southern Baptists' channel for reaching a lost world.'"

Rankin confronted another trustee criticism of outgoing president Parks, who complained trustees had become too involved in administrating the FMB. "I don't see the necessity of a dichotomy between the role of trustees and the role of staff," Rankin said. "We're a team."

Other Rankin ideas include: enhancing the spiritual training of new missionaries, developing a "rapid deployment force" to move into new mission fields, targeting internationals living in the United States, and developing a system to nurture young people interested in missions.

Rankin suggested the theme of his administration would be: "That all the world might know him, know him personally, like I know him."

In a news conference following the election, Rankin interpreted his

election as good news for Southern Baptist missionaries worldwide.

"I have walked where they walk," he said. He noted he and his wife, Bobbye, have been inundated with support from the mission field. "We have received such an outpouring of affirmation that this was the hope beyond hope that God would choose someone from among our missionaries."

Rankin promised the missions force would continue to grow, from the current 3,953 missionaries to a record 4,000 within coming months. And the growth will surpass 5,000 by the year 2000, he predicted.

But those missionaries may cooperate with other groups on two levels, he said, citing a difference between the moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and other "Great Commission Christians."

"We have taken great strides with other Great Commission Christians," he said, citing progress in developing cooperation with such groups worldwide. And while he ruled out an "organic union" with those missions-sending groups, he stressed that related ministry would continue.

But when asked about cooperation with the Fellowship, an organization started by Southern Baptists who have been disaffected by the SBC's rightward shift, he said he "would not see a possibility of working in any kind of union" with a group which adopts an "independent approach" to missions.

While he stressed the FMB and the Fellowship are not in competition on the mission field, he pointed out the Fellowship is competing for funds from the same resource pool that has supported the SBC.

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-- Marv Knox and Lacy Thompson contributed to this story.

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