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August 12, 2002

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES

(02-72)

Nashville, Tennessee AUG 21 2002

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**Requesting missionaries to affirm
faith statement averted disaster, Rankin says**

By Mark Wingfield

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The request for Southern Baptist Convention missionaries to sign an affirmation of the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" was necessary to head off an organizational disaster, according to International Mission Board President Jerry Rankin.

Using what he acknowledged "may be an extreme analogy," Rankin compared his leadership dilemma to what might have happened if the United States government had learned in advance about plans for last year's terrorist attacks.

Rankin said U.S. officials would have "done what was necessary to deter that tragedy," even if those tactics proved onerous.

"The airlines and general public would have been outraged at the delays and inconvenience of heightened security measures. The civil-liberties advocates would have probably called for impeachment of President Bush for profiling and detaining people of Middle Eastern descent, and other similar reactions," he said.

Rankin drew a parallel for his much-maligned request, which critics have said smacks of creedalism and indicates mistrust of missionaries on the field.

"Because of our willingness to affirm doctrinal accountability to the Southern Baptist Convention, the consequences that could have been disastrous for the credibility and support of the IMB have been diverted," Rankin said in a July 13 letter to missionaries.

"Taking appropriate steps to assure confidence and support on behalf of the SBC has not been without offense and misunderstanding, but this is a responsibility of leadership that I take very seriously," he added.

Rankin said he took the initiative to ask for a collective response from missionaries in order to head off "an embarrassing and divisive showdown" over the issue and to protect IMB trustees from having to reverse an earlier decision and impose a policy requiring affirmation of the faith statement.

Rankin said his own confidence in the doctrinal integrity of the missionary force never wavered, however. "I would not have taken such action without the confidence that our personnel serving with the IMB represent doctrinal integrity and denominational loyalty," he wrote.

Rankin said he sympathizes with IMB missionaries who were upset that anyone would question their beliefs, because he, too, was "offended and hurt" at accusations of doctrinal infidelity.

Although Rankin has said in the past that he issued the order to satisfy unnamed critics who were questioning missionaries' beliefs, he said his actions shouldn't be viewed as bowing to political pressure.

In 2001, Rankin wrote missionaries saying that personnel already under appointment wouldn't be forced to endorse the revised "Baptist Faith and Message." In his recent letter, Rankin said some missionaries perceived his request this year that they do so voluntarily, as a reversal, "which some assumed to be succumbing to political pressure."

"In 2001 I had communicated the policy officially adopted by our board," Rankin explained. "When questions and suspicions began to escalate, the board felt some action needed to be taken, but they did not want to reverse their earlier decision and signal any mistrust in our overseas personnel. .

"To deal with the crisis, I offered to secure the needed assurance with a personal request."

One source of suspicion resulted when IMB trustees, breaking rank with boards of other SBC entities, voted not to establish a policy making the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" a litmus test for continued employment.

"When we became the only entity not to require staff, faculty or missionaries to affirm the current 'Baptist Faith and Message,' questions began to arise regarding our accountability and whether we were 'protecting' those not aligned with the 'Baptist Faith and Message,'" Rankin wrote.

When one regional leader refused to affirm the faith statement, Rankin said, "It increased the speculation that there must be many others as well."

All six SBC seminaries have policies requiring professors to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message." All home missionaries serving under the North American Mission Board are also required to affirm the document.

Some other SBC agencies, however, stop short of requiring 100 percent compliance with the faith statement.

At LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville, Tenn., the SBC's publishing arm, only employees in "Southern Baptist required" positions -- about 25 percent of the workforce -- are asked to sign an affirmation that they will conduct their work in accordance with the "Baptist Faith and Message."

The Dallas-based Annuity Board, the SBC's insurance and retirement manager, hasn't made any public statement about requiring employees to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," but those in key leadership posts are required to be members of "cooperating" Southern Baptist churches.

Rankin reported that "most" missionaries "welcomed the opportunity" to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," but "some have struggled with the response and been offended as if they, personally, were being questioned."

Some others, he said, agree with the content of the 'Baptist Faith and Message' -- or disagree over minor points -- "but have felt the request itself made our confession of faith a creed," something which Baptists traditionally have opposed.

But Rankin claimed the faith statement has since its original adoption in 1925 functioned as "an instrument of doctrinal accountability," even though it is stated as such for the first time in the 2000 edition.

He quoted E.Y. Mullins, primary author of the original "Baptist Faith and Message," who wrote: "Baptists have always insisted upon their own right to declare their beliefs and to protect themselves by refusing to support men in important places as teachers and preachers who do not agree with them."

Rankin said no doctrinal problems have been discovered as a result of the recent process, but "it has grieved me" that some missionaries went public with criticism of IMB leaders in newsletters and the press.

He acknowledged that "a few have resigned and others have expressed their intention to do so rather than affirm the 'Baptist Faith and Message' and their willingness to work in accord with it."

Rankin said the process has been personally painful to him, but he concluded: "It was done for the benefit of your ministry and our kingdom task. This will enable us to get on with our mission of reaching a lost world with the solid support of Southern Baptists."

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Shortage of pastors looming as seminarians rethink their calling

By Andrew Black

DALLAS (ABP) -- Shane Higgs is a 27-year old student at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. He is studying for a master of divinity degree, the credential typically sought by prospective pastors. Yet Higgs hesitates when asked if he will follow that traditional route into ministry.

"I have been told by those closest to me that I'd make a good pastor, and I can see some gifting that would indicate this, but I'm extremely cautious about such a vocation," he said in an e-mail interview with the Christian lifestyle magazine FaithWorks.

Higgs came to seminary from Minneapolis, where he worked in advertising for about four years after college. "I sensed a clear call to leave advertising, and I'm pretty sure I'm called to be in seminary. But that's as clear as it gets right now," he said. "Seminary is primarily an opportunity to pursue God's call on my life ... and not necessarily vocational training."

Higgs isn't alone. Less than a third of seminary students intend to minister in congregations, according to a study by Auburn Theological Seminary in New York.

It's common to hear people confess to being afraid that if they answer a call to ministry, God might send them to Africa as a missionary. But, as jarring as it sounds, more and more spiritually sensitive and creative young Christians are now more frightened that God will ask them to be pastor of the church on the suburban corner.

The result, say researchers and seminary leaders, is an impending pastor shortage.

"What it means to local congregations is a crisis of ordained leadership as the boomers continue to retire," said seminary consultant Sheryl Carle Fancher.

The impact is already being felt. For all denominations surveyed by the Alban Institute, the number of ministers under 35 has fallen precipitously since the 1970s -- dropping by at least half and for some two thirds.

Seminaries and other organizations concerned for the future of the church are studying and discussing these trends. They cite a litany of negatives -- the prospect of low pay, exhausting job demands and dwindling social respect -- that make the pastorate so unattractive to young adults. Some highly publicized scandals involving ministers only make matters worse.

"Young people who are involved in the church see clergy being criticized or abused by congregational leadership, struggling with personal finances, and worn out," says Fancher, associate director of the Midwest Ministry Development Service, who has been consulting seminaries on this issue for more than a decade. "The picture doesn't look very appealing as a vocational choice."

Talk to seminarians, however, and a somewhat different picture emerges. Many are idealistic about being true to God's call but don't necessarily view churches as the best venue for using their gifts.

"I think 20-somethings go to seminary for noble reasons: they want to be about the transformation of people and communities and about making the Good News good news for people," said Jason Mitchell, 38, a seminary graduate in Dallas who is working two secular jobs.

But those young adults, he said, see "the church" as a group of people speaking mostly to themselves - too isolated from their community and too concerned with their own institutional viability or growth.

Mitchell said many idealistic and innovative Christians who might otherwise become pastors are instead starting small businesses and non-profit organizations that give them opportunities to encounter people different from themselves.

That doesn't mean they've given up on the church. Mitchell foresees the growth of new, authentic, Christian communities out of these coffee shops, thrift stores, non-profits and similar efforts. Instead of transplanting leaders from traditional churches, however, these new congregations will arise with "indigenous" leaders from within their own subculture.

Jason Mueller, a recent graduate of Truett Theological Seminary and co-pastor of Journey, a church in Dallas, is making plans to open a coffee shop that will serve as a community gathering place, where he believes he can be a kind of missionary to the unchurched.

Mueller said he doesn't believe his theological training will be wasted if he ends up delivering coffee instead of sermons. "In a lot of ways this is an embodiment of what I learned at seminary," he said. "There is so much baggage that comes with being a pastor that would keep me from really engaging culture and the people around me who don't go to Journey."

Barbara Wheeler, president of Auburn Seminary, said many idealistic and energetic young people who want to make a difference find congregational ministry too confining. While relationships between pastor and parishioners are rewarding, she said, most socially concerned young people see the church as lacking the potential to transform communities.

Brian McLaren, pastor of Cedar Ridge Community Church in suburban Washington, D.C., has become a mentor to many young Christian leaders. His recent book, "A New Kind of Christian," articulates many of their concerns, judging by the discussions the book has generated.

"I think the existing church is largely modern in its theology, not just style," McLaren said in an e-mail interview. "By modern, I mean focused on control, polemics, analysis, linear thinking, reductionism, institutions and events/decisions. Both liberal and conservative churches are two sides of this modern coin, I think.

"Meanwhile, the rising generation is more postmodern in its thinking, and the disconnect is huge. It's about empowerment, seeking understanding, holism, pattern and layered thinking, wonder, relationships and processes. These are huge differences. Many young Christians recognize the challenges of a turbulent time like this and believe most churches are too busy trying to weather the storm intact to risk innovation and rethinking familiar assumptions."

While some younger ministers "will provide compassionate care to these congregations," McLaren continued, "others have no doubt they are called to serve as missionaries to their own culture, which may require detachment from traditional models of church or ministry developed in a different time."

McLaren said if churches want young ministers to consider congregational ministry, they must create an environment where they are "cared for, listened to and respected."

Wilshire Baptist Church is hoping to demonstrate one way this can happen. The Dallas church recently launched a "residency" program in which young ministers-to-be spend two years gaining field experience on a church staff before going off on their own.

Just as medical students work in "teaching hospitals," churches can commit to be "teaching congregations," providing a forgiving environment in which seminary graduates can practice ministry, said George Mason, Wilshire's pastor.

At Ecclesia, a new congregation in the arts community of Houston, pastor Chris Seay has organized an apprenticeship program for young ministers who live and work at the inner-city church.

Will one of these approaches appeal to the many young Christians called to ministry but wary of traditional church-staff positions? If Shane Higgs is any indication, it might.

"I see the need to move towards decentralized, local and organic congregations that work to cultivate missional communities, which engage culture at the neighborhood level," he said.

"I could maybe be a pastor in this kind of setting, but very few exist. And I fear I'm too young, inexperienced and perhaps not gifted in the right ways to start one on my own. I need to be mentored in this kind of environment first.

"Needless to say, it will be extremely difficult to find a job anywhere as a pastor if I retain this kind of thinking. But at this stage in my journey I'm naïve and idealistic enough to want to take that risk. We'll see how long that lasts."

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