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Jerry Rankin: God's purpose  
lies ahead for SBC missions

By Robert O'Brien

Baptist Press  
5/28/93

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Beware if you book passage on the Orient Express.

It's not a journey for the faint of heart -- especially these days. You could end up as president of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

Jerry Allen Rankin stands on the verge of that destination 23 years after he and his wife, Bobbye, embarked for Indonesia as missionaries.

Three men before him -- two on slow boats to China -- departed for Asian mission fields over the past seven decades and rose through the ranks to become area administrators and then Foreign Mission Board chief executives.

Rankin, area director for Southern Asia and the Pacific since 1987, could follow M. Theron Rankin, Baker James Cauthen and R. Keith Parks on the final leg of that journey on June 14 in Houston.

That's when FMB trustees will gather to deliberate on the unanimous recommendation of a 15-member search committee to elect the 51-year-old Mississippian as the board's 10th president.

Rankin's name "percolated" to the top, one committee member said, after 14 months of deliberations as the committee worked against a volatile backdrop of Southern Baptist theological and political discontent.

"The whole pluralism of our trustee board is represented on that committee, and it's an act of God -- if I ever saw an act of God -- that the group came through with a unanimous decision," said committee chairman Joel Gregory of Dallas.

If elected, Rankin will have to find a miracle of his own to maintain missions advance in an environment of eroding finances, trust and morale. But he would enter the task, he said, with "absolute confidence God has a purpose for Southern Baptists and will point us in the right direction at the right time."

Ever since he walked the aisle at a Billy Graham crusade at age 10, then heard God's call to missions while studying Asia in an eighth grade geography class, Rankin has developed two growing convictions: God has the power to enable all things, and those things will happen in God's timing.

"When I heard Billy Graham preach I understood for the first time that I was a sinner," Rankin said. "As I grew as a Christian I learned I had the responsibility to submit to God's will."

That experience became home base at each point of his career. "At each step along the way, when I've gone back to try to identify God's call, I've found myself all the way back at my salvation experience. When I opened my heart to accept Christ as Savior I had a sense of peace, and I can recall thinking I wished everyone could have this experience."

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From the time he began preaching as a 16-year-old, Rankin headed inexorably toward Asia -- he thought to India.

But high school and college in Clinton, Miss., brought a healthy mix of other pursuits. He played football and saxophone, excelled academically, served as Baptist Student Union president, wrote sports news, took part in student government -- and dated "a beautiful girl named Bobbye" Simmons, his future wife.

Several years later, when he and Bobbye neared missionary appointment, visa problems denied them their chosen mission field of India. Thinking they had misread God's call, they and their two children packed up for Indonesia.

Ten years as a church planter in Indonesia seasoned the missiology Rankin had learned from Professor Cal Guy at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and put him in a place of "tremendous spiritual revival."

And it taught him about God's timing.

Area Director Bill Wakefield, now FMB vice president for Asia, asked for a volunteer from the Indonesia mission to go to India for three months to consult on church growth.

"You can imagine what flamed up in our hearts having felt that call to India almost 10 years earlier," Rankin said.

That three months, and other visits to develop church growth strategy and train pastors, set the stage for Rankin's greatest mission field contribution: helping start 400 new churches in India over a 10-year period. Then he took his consulting skills to other countries in the region.

"The irony of it is that maybe Bobbye and I didn't mistake the call to India," he reminisced. "It just came in God's timing and in his way. Ten years later, we found ourselves consulting there in church growth and five years after that supervising all the work in India."

That role was one job along the way in increasing responsibility given Rankin as he demonstrated increasing organizational and administrative skill.

The time in Indonesia taught Rankin something else -- a defining quality of his life and style as a missionary and administrator.

"I was hit by my own inadequacy and that I had no business being there without the empowering of the Holy Spirit and assurance of God's presence in my life," he said.

Every morning about 4:30 Rankin arises to "spend an hour or two with the Lord" in prayer and Bible study. It's part of his long pilgrimage toward the Spirit-filled life.

His pilgrimage, he said, has led both to a source of power through God's Spirit and to misunderstanding by some who label him a charismatic who speaks in tongues.

That charge led the FMB presidential search committee to subject Rankin to one of the most intense examinations he has had on any subject. Chairman Joel Gregory said a thorough investigation, which ranged from the United States to the mission field, "totally satisfied" the committee that Rankin "does not practice, teach or advocate glossolalia and has held true to Baptist doctrine."

But Rankin accepts the validity of spiritual gifts and will not criticize their use. He does so on the basis of his belief in the Bible, which teaches about gifts of the Spirit, and his observation of their power at work in Asia.

During his biblical studies, he "came to the conviction and deliberate decision that you cannot discount any portion of the Bible for any reason and still hold to the absolute authority of the Word of God." He said he believes "God inspired Scripture in its entirety and that his Holy Spirit continues to illumine it today.

"Therefore, I cannot in conscience throw out any portion of the Bible, either on the basis of ultra-dispensationalist theory (which dismisses some gifts of the Spirit) or on the basis of higher criticism," he said.

Rankin, though quick to laugh and open to ideas, expresses his beliefs seriously and forthrightly and administers with a decisiveness and independent-minded style some have called autocratic.

He sees his style as collaborative, but admits he believes in streamlining administrative structures, moving authoritatively and minimizing group decisions.

"When everyone is involved in a decision, it usually results in what's acceptable to everyone and threatening to no one," he explained. "That usually reduces it to a fairly mediocre common denominator -- and stifles innovators and visionaries."

No one can say Rankin lacks confidence in his ability to lead.

But he tempers the confidence with a healthy dose of awe and trepidation as he stands in line to provide spiritual and administrative leadership to the far-flung work of 3,900 missionaries in 129 countries.

The wife of the late M. Theron Rankin, the board's seventh chief executive, once said: "Theron was just an ordinary man with the world inside his heart."

That description links the two Rankins closer than even the family roots Jerry believes they both share.

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EDITORS' NOTE: For use by editors as deemed appropriate, below are reactions to the selection of Jerry Rankin as Foreign Mission Board president from Bill Wakefield, FMB vice president for Asia, who has been Rankin's supervisor in Rankin's role as area director for Southeast Asia and the Pacific.

"I'm excited the search committee has chosen someone whose commitment to missions is without question, whose focus of life has been foreign missions and whose example in his own mission career is excellent. I'm so pleased because of Jerry's missiological and strategic grasp of missions. I think from all of these viewpoints he is an excellent choice. Having worked with Jerry over the years -- I started working with him when he was a student summer missionary in the Philippines and I supervised his work then -- I think his perception of the needs of the world and the way Southern Baptists can respond is probably as great, as significant as anyone who could have been chosen.

"There's no way that one could perceive that he has been chosen for any other reason than because of who he is in terms of missions. That has to be a cause for rejoicing for all of us concerned."

Wakefield's response to queries concerning Rankin and spiritual gifts and administrative style differences:

"The matter of emphasis (on spiritual gifts) and the degree of emphasis is something we certainly have discussed, and Jerry is just as open about that as he is about anything else. I think his own response would be indicative of that. But his response to the discussions we've had in terms of having a balanced emphasis have been without any hesitation on his part or reluctance to perceive the need for a careful balance. I don't know if I would call it contention. I guess my own style is if I think something needs to be looked at because of its impact on our mission program, we discuss these things very openly in all contexts, in the context of (work) evaluations particularly. But I would have to say that Jerry has been characterized by complete openness, willingness to look at things with me and respond appropriately. I'm confident that not only I but the search committee has fully looked at this matter and have determined that it is within the bounds that can be managed appropriately. If my name is being used (in stories) it would be only correct to say that Jerry has responded more than fully to any discussion we have had regarding the matter and that's why he continues to have my confidence and we have continued to work together."

Wakefield's response to queries whether he once asked that Rankin be fired:

"That is not true. Of course, if I had thought he should be fired I know I had it within my power to do it. But we certainly had discussion about (spiritual gifts) and other matters I felt needed to be looked at. And again, Jerry's response has been excellent in terms of accepting my leadership when I have worked with him, and I'd emphasize I have worked with him even back when he was a college student. And, of course, he was my choice as area director because of the qualities I've already mentioned."

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Ankerberg attacks, Lewis defends  
HMB Freemasonry recommendation By Art Toalston

NASHVILLE (BP)--Southern Baptists could be guilty of "one more blow against the purity of the historic Christian Faith" if the convention approves a stance on Freemasonry recommended by the Home Mission Board, according to John Ankerberg, host of a weekly issues-oriented nationally syndicated telecast.

The Southern Baptist Convention is scheduled to vote on an HMB recommendation that membership in Masonic lodges be a matter of individual conscience and local church decision-making. The convention meets June 15-17 in Houston.

"This is the beginning of a clear victory for the Lodge," Ankerberg wrote in a letter to his mailing list. Ankerberg attends Brainerd Baptist Church in Chattanooga, Tenn.

Meanwhile, HMB President Larry Lewis has written a letter to state Baptist newspaper editors, commenting: "I believe God has intervened" in deliberations by HMB directors leading to the Freemasonry recommendation "in what could have been an extremely divisive issue."

The reasons for God's intervention, Lewis stated: "... so that we might get back to our primary focus of helping Southern Baptists plant and grow strong churches to reach our nation for Jesus and minister in His name."

Lewis defended the HMB recommendation, stating, "... ours is not a hierarchical denomination that dictates beliefs of churches and members. Therefore, consistent with the doctrines of the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church, the Report recommends 'membership in a Masonic Order be a matter of personal conscience.'

"This doesn't imply people can believe whatever they want or advocate 'let your conscience be your guide' as some have charged," Lewis continued. "The Report exhorts Southern Baptists to prayerfully examine Freemasonry in light of the scriptures 'as led by the Holy Spirit of God.' That isn't a cop-out ... it's Baptist!"

In separate comments to Baptist Press, Martin King, HMB public relations director, charged that Ankerberg has made "a number of factual errors" in his claims and "has pre-conceived ideas about the issues and interprets everything through those pre-conceived judgments."

Ankerberg, in actively taking his case against the HMB Freemasonry recommendation to the public, has:

- appeared on numerous radio talk shows across the country, including two on the USA Radio Network and one on the Moody Broadcast System.
- aired a six-part series during his weekly TV time slot focused in large part against the proposed HMB recommendation, "The Clash Between Christianity and the Masonic Lodge."
- written a 79-page critique of the recommendation and a lengthier study of Freemasonry by the HMB's interfaith witness department.

Ankerberg told Baptist Press he has not sought to be elected as a messenger from his church but did attempt to organize a debate on Freemasonry's compatibility with Christianity immediately before the SBC in Houston. However, he said Lewis, Masonic editor John W. Boettjer and Baylor University President Herbert Reynolds and President Emeritus Abner McCall -- both, as Masons, featured on the cover of a prominent Masonic journal in February -- declined his invitation to participate.

Addressing the matter of personal conscience and Masonic membership, Ankerberg in his 79-page critique of the HMB proposal noted: "Certainly the Baptist stress upon individual freedom of conscience cannot be carried so far as to accept the right of Christians to join the Mormon Church or the Baha'i Faith. Then on what basis can the Southern Baptist Convention accept it as permissible for a Christian to join the Masonic Lodge?"

"The issue is not individual conscience; the issue is, Can Christianity and Masonry be logically joined together?"

Noting, for example, the HMB documents acknowledge various ways Christianity and Masonry are at odds, Ankerberg contended it is illogical to assume "an individual's conscience will somehow overcome Masonry's non-Christian doctrines."

Ankerberg, in his critique, waged numerous other challenges to the HMB recommendation and the interfaith witness department's Freemasonry study.

He cited stances against Freemasonry by such denominations as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian Church in America and Church of the Nazarene and asked, "... if individual Christians could actually become Masons in good conscience, then why all the negative conclusions condemning Masonry and urging Christians not to join the Masonic Lodge from all these widely varying Christian bodies?"

Of the interfaith witness study, Ankerberg charged it has "a Masonic agenda" and is "biased scholarship."

He noted that Gary Leazer, then director of the interfaith witness department, allowed at least two Masons to critique a preliminary copy of the study "and then accepted their changes," according to a letter Leazer wrote to a Mason in Chattanooga later circulated to news media.

"At the same time, he (Leazer) deliberately did not allow Christians opposed to Masonry, such as Dr. (James "Larry") Holly, to read the Study," Ankerberg charged. The HMB review of Freemasonry resulted from an initiative by Holly, a Beaumont, Texas, physician, at last year's SBC in Indianapolis for a convention-wide study of the issue.

The HMB's Lewis reprimanded Leazer for the letter to the Chattanooga Mason, and Leazer subsequently asked to be relieved of his duties as interfaith witness department director.

Lewis, in his letter to state Baptist papers, nevertheless defended the interfaith witness department study as "a scholarly examination of the teachings of and charges against Freemasonry. Although certainly not exhaustive, it is a fair and accurate review of the issues which Southern Baptists should find interesting and enlightening.

"However, our focus needs to be on the only document which is scheduled to be presented to the Houston Convention -- the six-page Report from the HMB directors," Lewis wrote. "The Report includes a summary of the findings of the board about the teachings of Freemasonry, both positive and negative."

The HMB's King, in comments to Baptist Press, voiced concern over various "factual errors" in Ankerberg's mailing list letter, his 79-page critique of the HMB recommendation and study and various broadcasts.

King cited six examples, such as, "The book says there is a '107-page analysis that was condensed to a 75-page Study' as if there were two different documents when in actuality they were exactly the same except for margins and spacing," and, "Dr. Ankerberg has claimed as recently as this past weekend that someone was 'fired' from the HMB over this issue even though we informed his office several weeks ago that the statement is untrue."

King then stated Ankerberg "doesn't have a basic understanding of the events" and asked, "How reliable is his information on a complex subject such as Freemasonry if such simple factual errors are present?"

Among other concerns voiced by King: "In his letter to his supporters, Dr. Ankerberg underlines for emphasis a number of words and phrases in the summary of the Report. However, Dr. Ankerberg left out as unimportant such phrases as 'priesthood of the believer,' 'autonomy of the local church,' 'the teachings of the Scripture' and 'led by the Spirit of God.' Those aren't unimportant phrases. They are just as vital as the remainder of the statement."

The text of the HMB recommendation to be voted on by the SBC states:

"In light of the fact that many tenets and teachings of Freemasonry are not compatible with Christianity and Southern Baptist doctrine, while others are compatible with Christianity and Southern Baptist doctrine, we therefore recommend that consistent with our denomination's deep convictions regarding the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church, membership in a Masonic Order be a matter of personal conscience."

The recommendation also exhorts Southern Baptists "to prayerfully and carefully evaluate Freemasonry in light of the Lordship of Christ, the teachings of the Scripture, and the findings of this report, as led by the Holy Spirit of God."

"We are disappointed," King said, "that Dr. Ankerberg has staged this personal crusade against the Report on Freemasonry since it has been recommended for passage by both sides of this very complex issue."

Both Holly and the Masonic editor, Boettjer, issued statements of support for the recommendation after HMB directors approved it in March.

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Missionary recovering after  
attack at Venezuelan camp

By Mary E. Speidel

Baptist Press  
5/28/93

VALENCIA, Venezuela (BP)--Southern Baptist missionary Roy Hawkins has lost partial vision in his right eye after being attacked at a Baptist camp near Valencia, Venezuela.

Hawkins, from Sand Springs, Okla., is recovering in Tulsa, Okla., from a cornea transplant received after medical evacuation to the United States. He and a group of missionaries and Venezuelan Baptists were attacked recently while repairing a fence at Camp Carabobo, Venezuelan Baptists' national camp outside Valencia.

The assailants apparently were squatters trying to claim about 78 acres adjacent to the camp. The National Baptist Convention of Venezuela owns that land and the 75-acre camp, purchased with help from the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. The site is near a national monument marking the place where Venezuela gained independence from Spain.

The Baptists were surprised when they heard rocks and bottles crashing into a pickup truck parked near their work site. The attackers had been hiding in tall grass. "We didn't see them until they were right on us," said camp director Hugh Redmon, a missionary from Panama City, Fla.

Hawkins said he didn't fully realize the danger they were in until he was hit in the eye by a stone. Simultaneously, another attacker was stalking him with a knife.

"I thought, 'This could be it,'" he said.

The missionary fled to the nearby truck and jumped inside. Another rock crashed through the window, hitting him in the head. He also was struck by glass bottles.

George Wilson, a Southern Baptist volunteer from San Antonio, Texas, fell face down in the mud after being cut on the cheek. Redmon helped him into the truck, narrowly escaping injury himself.

While the squatters continued the stoning, the Baptists quickly piled into their vehicles and sped away. Wilson and Hawkins were the only ones seriously injured.

Wilson later underwent plastic surgery for facial injuries and has returned to work. He is a maintenance volunteer at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Los Teques, Venezuela.

Hawkins' injuries included a detached retina, partial paralysis in his face and temporary hearing loss in his right ear. He underwent surgery in Venezuela, then flew to the United States for further treatment.

In addition to the cornea transplant, surgeons removed the damaged lens of that eye and replaced it with an artificial lens. Hawkins' hearing returned after doctors found a piece of glass lodged in his eardrum. But he still has no frontal vision in his right eye, and physicians don't think it will be fully restored.

The attack climaxed a conflict that began in March, when squatters tried to claim the land next to the camp, Redmon said. As many as 300 families, nearly 700 people, had begun building shelters on the property, where Venezuelan Baptists hope to construct new national convention offices.

Venezuelan law says when land is abandoned, people have a legal right to put up a shelter and use the land to grow crops, according to missionaries. However, the land at the camp was not abandoned and was legally owned by Venezuelan Baptists.

The situation at Camp Carabobo began when some unknown individuals started illegally selling the land to Venezuelans, who came from other cities and from parts of Valencia to occupy it, Redmon said. Baptists sought police protection for the property shortly after the squatters' arrival.

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Police and members of Venezuela's national guard tried to evict the squatters on eight different occasions. During the final confrontation, squatters threw rocks at guardsmen, who had to fire shots into the air and use tear gas to get them to leave. The conflict drew national media coverage.

The squatters have been off the land for several weeks, but they have continued to threaten Redmon and other workers at the camp.

"Pray for our safety. I've never had to look over my shoulder before," said Redmon, who was bruised by stones thrown by squatters several days after the initial attack. Jacobo Garcia, executive secretary of the Venezuelan Baptist convention, was hit by rocks at the same time but wasn't seriously hurt.

During the month-long ordeal, activities came to a standstill at the camp, used by Baptists as well as other evangelicals. The Baptist convention has hired security guards to patrol the property and construction workers to build a wall around it. These measures have been expensive for the convention, added Redmon.

In Oklahoma, Hawkins and his wife, Judy, are staying with relatives until physicians determine when he can return to Venezuela. The couple had to leave behind a 16-year-old son who is finishing school there. They also left several projects at Emmaus Baptist Mission in Valencia. Hawkins asked Southern Baptists to pray that Venezuelan Baptists will continue the projects: a medical clinic, a program teaching job skills to women abandoned by their husbands and a preschool and first grade expected to open this fall.

Doctors have told him he should be suffering great pain given the extent of his injuries. But that hasn't been the case.

"I've had so many letters and visits from people saying they were praying that I wouldn't be in pain. Their prayers have been answered," Hawkins said.

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CORRECTION: In (BP) story titled "SBC leaders voice enthusiasm for Rankin as FMB nominee," dated 5/27/93, please replace the 13th paragraph in the story with the following paragraph:

H. Edwin Young, SBC president and pastor of Second Baptist Church in Houston: "Dr. Jerry Rankin has the background, experience, maturity and the high sense of call that the new president of our FMB needs to have for 'Such A Time As This' (theme of SBC in Houston). I have great confidence in the opinion of the committee and I concur with its members that this is definitely God's man to lead us in the 21st century as we seek to introduce a lost world to our Lord and Savior."

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