World Relief Names Former General Motors Executive as New President

Sammy Mah’s appointment is part of a corporate restructuring designed to boost the organization’s ability to respond to disaster

As part of a major reorganizing campaign aimed at positioning World Relief to be a leading advocate for the world’s poor and needy, the Christian humanitarian organization recently appointed a former General Motors executive as its president.

Sammy Mah was to be installed as head of World Relief April 18, ending a leadership search that began last year after the resignation of former president Clive Calver. Previously Calver had been general secretary of the Evangelical Alliance of Great Britain, the United Kingdom’s equivalent of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE).

Now senior pastor of Walnut Hill Community Church in Bethel, Conn., Calver is credited with having raised the visibility of World Relief and crystallizing its vision of “helping churches help churches help the poor” during his seven-year tenure.

“We all credit Clive with polishing off the vision we were founded [on],” said acting president Tim Ziemer, who was to step down April 18. “We understood that the church’s role is to reach out and do compassion ministry. When you do that compassionate work and you evangelize, you see light. One without the other doesn’t necessarily get you where you want to go. It’s not the whole gospel. Clive came to this organization and made sure we all knew that.”

Both Ziemer's and Calver's resignations came as part of a massive restructuring aimed at transitioning World Relief from a traditional style of ministry leadership, in which an organization is led by a visionary president and operations are carried out by an executive director, to a CEO model.

"We really believed we had some of the finest technical people in World Relief," said board chairman Gordon MacDonald. "What we needed was leadership at the top in this new era who would bring the best out of the competence we have. … We were not looking for a leader who was going to give us a new mission or take us in new directions. We were looking for someone who would take this mission and run with it."

MacDonald said the new structure was needed to enable World Relief to realize a series of resolutions the board adopted last year. Among them is a desire to make World Relief, which is the humanitarian-assistance arm of the NAE, a leader in addressing such issues as refugee resettlement, the AIDS epidemic, micro-enterprise and food development, and child mortality.

"We don't have any sense of urgency to be the biggest; we would never come into World Vision's league," MacDonald said. "But quality-wise, we would like to be among the best."

He added that World Relief wants to sound "a prophetic voice" to the U.S. church to remember the poor. "The average Christian in America doesn't see his or her commitment to the issue of the poor as an evidence of conversion," MacDonald said. "And we would like to be a leader organization in the 21st century of making sure that the Christian community gets that message. That this is not an option; it's a given."

Other humanitarian organizations, such as Compassion International and World Vision, which operates a budget close to $1 billion, have been using a CEO model for several years. Describing Mah as "a very godly man with very vigorous and deep faith in Jesus and a great sensitivity to God's calling and leading," MacDonald said the board believed Mah was "capable of running a finely tuned organization and bringing out the best in individuals."

The son of Chinese immigrants, Mah earned an MBA from the University of Michigan and spent 27 years as an executive at General Motors. He and his wife, Lorelei, and their three children have been active in youth ministry at their church, Cornerstone Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Brighton, Mich., and have participated in missions trips to various parts of the world.

Mah's arrival comes as World Relief continues to recover from a challenging 2001 move to Baltimore. The relocation consolidated offices in Illinois, New York and Georgia and largely is viewed as a positive change. But it also resulted in a significant loss in domestic staff, as some key personnel chose not to transfer. The organization, which operates a $40 million budget, later cut additional staff due to a decline in giving after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

MacDonald said World Relief has braved the worst of the transition, and he is optimistic about the organization's future. Despite the changes, Ziemer said, World Relief has been able to respond to recent natural disasters, with teams going to work in Indonesia after the tsunami, Grenada after Hurricane Jeanne and Iran after an earthquake struck in December.

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