

Pawlenty leads in informal poll of evangelical leaders

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty is the top Republican pick of evangelical leaders, according to an informal survey, with 45 percent saying he would be their choice for GOP nominee in the 2012 election.

Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, which conducted the survey, said the results weren't surprising since Pawlenty "is so often identified as an evangelical."

But Anderson, Pawlenty's longtime pastor at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minn., noted that the outcome of the larger evangelical vote remains uncertain.

"Like the rest of the nation, there are still many undecided," he said. "With more than a year before the national nominating conventions, a lot can change."

The NAE board, which has about 100 members, was asked an open-ended question in its monthly poll: "Assuming Barack Obama is the Democratic candidate, if you were to choose a preferred Republican presidential candidate for 2012, who would you name?"

Former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney came in second, at 14 percent, and 22 percent were undecided. NAE spokeswoman Sarah Kropp said other names mentioned were not statistically significant.

"Tim and Mary (Pawlenty) are devoted followers of Jesus, bright, articulate, a proven record and have none of the negatives of the other candidates," said George Wood, general superintendent of the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination that is a member of the NAE.

Four years ago, NAE board members chose former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee as the winner of a survey that included both Democratic and Republican candidates.