

THE HISTORY OF FLORIDA BAPTIST
LANGUAGE CONGREGATIONS

BY

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The History of Florida Baptist Language Congregations

The history of the Baptist ethnic missions in Florida is an intriguing story closely interwoven with changing world conditions, people uprooted from their native lands, and the responsiveness of Southern Baptist to share their faith in Jesus Christ.

Ethnic missions for Florida Baptists had its beginning, not with Cubans, but with American Indians. About 1907, Creek Indian missionaries from Oklahoma came seeking to evangelize the Seminole and Miccosukee Indians of Florida. Travel was crude and difficult and the Indians were hard to locate. Missionaries would stay six months to a year, then return to Oklahoma. In 1923, Willie King arrived and continued to serve as a missionary to the Indians until 1945.

In 1951, the Home Mission Board appointed Genus and Carolyn Crenshaw as missionaries to the Florida Indians. Under their leadership, a Baptist church was constituted on each of the three Indian reservations (Hollywood, Brighton, and Big Cypress) as well as a mission on the Tamiami Trail, forty miles west of Miami. Three additional missions were established as well. The Crenshaws retired in 1984, but continue to live at the First Seminole Baptist Church, Hollywood and remain active in Indian missions.

Deaf Ministries

The second language mission ministry to evolve was among the deaf of Florida. Records show that the First Baptist Church of Jacksonville began a ministry among the deaf in 1923. During the fifties the work continued to develop throughout the state under the leadership of missionaries M. R. and Helen DeMeree. DeMeree was followed by Clifford Bruffey and George Thomas.

In 1970, Donald and Yvonne Otwell were appointed by the Home Mission Board as missionaries to the deaf and blind of the state. Under Otwell's leadership the deaf ministries had grown to sixty in 1988.

The Development of Hispanic Congregations

Many factors have converged to bring about the evolving of Hispanic congregations in Florida. Among them have been the proximity of South Florida to Latin America and the revolution which triumphed in Cuba in 1959.

A Hispanic Church in Key West

The first Hispanic work in South Florida had its initiation with the establishment of a Good Will center in Key West by the Home Mission Board in 1940, directed by a Miss Taylor. Following a revival conducted by Abdiel Silva of Tampa, several Hispanic persons were baptized by the First Baptist Church. In 1947, Ismael Negrin became the first pastor of the Hispanic congregation with financial support of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

In 1948, the Home Mission Board constructed a church building on Watson Street for the Hispanic church. The church continued to meet there until September 5, 1953 when they moved to a new building on White Street. Services were held in English and Spanish for many years. Pastors at White Street Baptist Church have been Ismael Negrin, S. A. Candal, Gary Carpenter, J. C. Lewis, Luis Manuel Lopez Munoz, Albert Joaquin, Eliseo Rodriguez Alberto Saenz, Gus Sanchez, and Israel Garcia. The church property continues to be owned by the Home Mission Board.

Tampa

Prior to initiating Hispanic mission work in Key West, the Home Mission Board began a Hispanic church in Ybor City, a section of the city of Tampa. The Ybor City population was made up largely of Cubans and Italians who were involved in the cigar industry. Through the years unsettled political conditions in Cuba had resulted in an exodus of refugees to Tampa and Key West.

Records are incomplete, but the Hispanic church in Ybor City began approximately in 1945 with Abdiel Silva, Sr. as pastor. As in the case of the Key West Hispanic mission work, the Home Mission Board conducted a Good Will center at the same location. Beside the Good Will center the Board constructed an attractive Latin style church building.

Because of community change, the two buildings now are used for a Haitian Baptist congregation, although the property remains in the name of the Home Mission Board.

Following the pastorate of Abdiel Silva, the Home Mission Board sent a non-Spanish speaking pastor to Ybor City. The result was a departure of a major number of members who formed the Latin American Church, an independent congregation. Latin American Church re-affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention in 1980 under the leadership of pastor David Leyva. It is now, by far, the largest Hispanic Baptist church in the Tampa Bay Baptist Association. The Ybor City Hispanic Church was pastored in later years by Frank Ramirez, and Alexander Pasetti. In 1968 the church disbanded.

Miami Hispanic Missions

The Hispanic Baptist work began in Miami in 1948 as a department of Central Baptist Church in Miami as a result of the concern of pastor C. Roy Angell. Mr. and Mrs. Manuel Aquayo were enlisted to head the department. In 1950, Aquayo was ordained by the church and named the first pastor. In 1952, Aquayo resigned and Jose M. Fleites was called as pastor. During the first ten years, the congregation met in Central Baptist Church.

In 1957, the Hispanic congregation with help from the Home Mission Board secured their own property and two years later (September 19, 1959) the congregation was constituted as Primera Iglesia Bautista Hispana Central de Miami. Thus began the Hispanic mission work in Miami.

The First Hispanic Missionary in Miami

In August 1954, the Home Mission Board sent Milton S. Leach and his wife Wilma to Miami to assist in the development of Hispanic congregations. At that time, the only Hispanic Baptist Congregations in Miami were the Latin Department of Central Baptist Church and the Hispanic mission of Stanton Memorial Baptist Church. South Miami Baptist Church maintained preaching stations in Princeton, Florida City, and Goulds. The 1956 minutes of the Miami Baptist Association reported that there were 80,000 Spanish speaking people in Miami of which 248 were members of the Hispanic congregations. By 1958, the Hispanic Baptist congregations had increased to ten.

Revolution in Cuba, Refugees in Miami

January 1, 1959 was destined to bring a dramatic change to all Baptist work in South Florida. Fulgencio Batista, president of Cuba, went into exile and Fidel Castro and Communism took over the Caribbean nation.

From that date refugees began to flee Cuba by the thousands. Most made Miami their exile home. Among the refugees were many Baptists as well as Cuban pastors.

The Home Mission Board set up a refugee relief and resettlement center in 1962 in the Allapatta Baptist Church with Robert Fricke, a former missionary to Cuba, as director.

So many refugees! How do we witness to them? As the refugees flooded into Miami, the Baptist leadership pondered over the best method to reach them for Christ. Land and new buildings could not be provided quickly for the large number of Hispanic churches which were needed. Exile Cuban Baptist pastors were available, but where could they serve?

J. Ray Dobbins, Director of Missions, Miami Baptist Association, approached Milton Leach with an idea one morning. Why not put the exile pastors to work as associate pastors of English speaking churches? They could serve as pastors of Hispanic departments until the Hispanics were fully integrated into the Anglo churches. After all, he reasoned, all the Cubans would be speaking English within ten years or perhaps Castro will fall and most Cubans will return to their homeland.

By 1961, there were 17 Hispanic chapels of which 12 were departments.

By 1964, the Hispanic population in Dade County stood at approximately 234,000. (130,000 Cuban exiles, 55,000 permanent Cuban residents, 40,000 Puerto Ricans and approximately 9,000 other Hispanics) composing about 23 percent of the total population. The number of Hispanic Baptist missions and churches stood at 25. Most were being pastored by Cuban exiles.

One Era Closes, Another Begins

In the latter part of 1964, Milton Leach and his wife Wilma were transferred to Puerto Rico by the Home Mission Board to give direction to Baptist missions there. For about a year, Robert Fricke served as interim missionary/director of Hispanic missions for the Miami Baptist Association. At the close of the year, Fricke and his wife Ann were appointed missionaries to Mexico.

On September 1, 1965, Hubert Hurt, who was at that time a missionary to Panama and who had served with his wife Eva for nine years overseas (four in Cuba and five in Panama) was reassigned by the Home Mission Board to Miami.

At his coming, the position description was modified to include the entire state of Florida and all ethnic groups, rather than just Hispanics and the Miami Baptist Association as had been Leach's assignment. Thus, Hurt became Florida Baptists first Language Missions Director.

At that time, there was no cooperative agreement between the Home Mission Board and the Florida Baptist Convention, which meant that administration and funding were directly from the Home Mission Board.

At the time Hurt began his ministry, ethnic congregations consisted of four Hispanic congregations outside of the Miami Baptist Association (two in Tampa, one in Key West and one in Immokalee), an Italian church (in Tampa) and a Czechoslovakian church in Masaryktown.

In 1968, with the election of Harold C. Bennett as executive secretary-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention, a cooperative agreement was reached between the Florida Baptist Convention and the Home Mission Board, bringing all Home Mission work in Florida under the administration of the Florida Baptist Convention.

The Hurts were requested to relocate to Jacksonville in 1970, so that the Language Mission work could be better coordinated with the work of Florida Baptists. Until 1972, Hurt sought to continue the direction of the language mission work in Miami, along with the growing work in other parts of the state.

Catalytic Missionaries

By 1972 it was clear that it was essential that a missionary be assigned specifically to the Miami Baptist Association and Richard Bryant, the director of missions, selected Harry Holland, a former military chaplain, to coordinate the ministry. Holland's ministry there was short lived, for he died of a brain tumor in 1973.

Holland was succeeded by Ramon Martinez who came with his wife Rosa from a church in Fresno, California. Martinez served in the position two years before moving to Nashville to become a liaison

Martinez was followed by John Pistane in 1976 who continued in that position until 1982. At the present time (1988) the position is held by Reinaldo Carvajal, who has served as the multi-ethnic catalytic missionary in the Miami Baptist Association since 1983.

A Higher Profile for Language Missions

A major event in the life of Florida Baptist brought a higher profile and undergirding of language missions in Florida. Dan C. Stringer was elected Executive Director-Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention in 1979. Up until that time the Florida language missions director had been an associate in the Cooperative Missions Department. In 1980, Hubert Hurt left Florida for a staff position with the Home Mission Board in Atlanta. In 1981, while the position was still vacant, the program was raised to department level and James L. Goodson, director of the Missions Division, Florida Baptist Convention, contacted Hurt about the possibility of returning as the department director. In May 1981, Hurt was elected to the post and assumed his duties June 15, 1981.

Since then with strong backing of the Florida Baptist Convention, three other catalytic missionaries, as well as a state consultant for Haitian work, have been added to the list of Florida language missionaries. Milton Leach began serving in Gulf Stream/Palm Lake Associations in 1982, Alcides Guajardo in the Greater Orlando Association in 1984, and Eliu Camacho in the Southwest Gulf Coast area in 1983. Camacho was named as a consultant in the Evangelism department, Florida Baptist Convention in 1985 and was followed by Raul Vazquez in 1987.

In addition, Ramon Martinez was added to the staff of the Florida Baptist Convention in 1983 as director of the Ethnic Resource Coordination office in the Education Division.

A Need for Trained Pastors Surfaced

Prior to the coming of Dan Stringer and Jim Goodson, the need for the training of new pastors had surfaced. The idea for establishing a theological training school in Miami was shared with Harold C. Bennett, Woodrow Fuller and Ray Dobbins of the Florida Baptist Convention as well as with Oscar Romo of the Home Mission Board. The result was the establishment of the Ethnic Branch of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in Miami in 1978 with joint funding provided by the New Orleans Seminary, the Florida Baptist Convention and the Home Mission Board. As of April 1988, 78 students had graduated with an associate of divinity degree. There were 90 students enrolled in 1988 with 13 scheduled to graduate in May.

The first director of the program was James Benson. Since 1980 the director has been Julio S. Diaz. Studies are conducted in Spanish for Hispanic students and in French and Creole for Haitians.

Other Ethnic Groups

An Expanding Mission Field

Ethnic Missions continued to develop during the seventies and eighties until nineteen languages were represented.

Hispanic congregations numbered 108 in 1988. Congregations are located not only in Miami, Tampa, Immokalee and Key West as was true in 1964, but in Jacksonville, Orlando, West Palm Beach, Fort Lauderdale, Hollywood, Pompano Beach, Indiantown, Lakeland, Gainesville, Deltona, Bowling Green, Wauchula, Naples, Fort Myers, Sarasota and other cities and towns. The U. S. Census Bureau reported 1,250,000 Hispanics in Florida in 1985, in contrast with 782,371 in 1980.

Haitian Churches Develop

In recent years the fastest growing ethnic work has been among the Haitians. The first Haitian congregation in Florida was initiated in Miami by pastor Paul Lasseur at Central Baptist Church in 1976. By 1988 the number had grown to 57. Pastoral leadership has come from pastors trained in Haiti as well as those trained in the Ethnic Branch of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary in Miami. In 1986 Renaud Balzora, a Haitian pastor, was appointed by the Home Mission Board as state Haitian consultant.

Chinese

The Chinese Baptist Church was initiated by J. P. Carter, pastor of the Flagler Street Baptist Church, Miami in 1958. Pastors have been Dick Wong and Kwong Wah Lau. The Church was constituted in 1978. Services are held in Mandarin, Cantonese and English. Under Lau's leadership the church purchased property and built an excellent educational building and sanctuary. Ministries among Chinese have also been developed by the First Baptist Churches of Jacksonville and Gainesville.

Korean

A Korean layman named David Kim was instrumental in helping initiate the First Korean Baptist congregation in Florida. The work began in the First Baptist Church, Winter Park in 1977. Chang Moon became their first pastor and led in the securing of property and the constituting of the church. Since 1977 Korean congregations have increased to 16 and are located in Orlando, Jacksonville, Miami, Tallahassee, Fort Pierce, Panama City, Pensacola, Satellite Beach, Daytona Beach, Lakeland, Tampa (2), Ocala, West Palm Beach and Gainesville.

Cambodian and Laotian

The first Cambodian mission was a joint venture of the Woodlawn, Murray Hill and Southside Estates Baptist Churches of Jacksonville. The mission began meeting in the Woodlawn Baptist Church in 1984 with leadership provided by Bob and Joyce Harllee, Bob and June Glover and Wayne Eichlog. In 1985 Vanthang Chi was called as pastor.

The Norwood Baptist Church, St. Petersburg found itself surrounded by about 1500 Laotians, so in 1987 the church called Bounloaune Keobounhom as pastor and established a mission among them.

Filipinos

Charles Lawhon, a former missionary to the Philippines initiated mission work among Filipinos in 1970. At present there are three Jacksonville churches ministering to them. In addition, Filipino missions have developed in Pensacola (West Pensacola B. Ch.) and Winter Park (Goldenrod Baptist Church).

Rumanians

The Rumanian Church of Hollywood was begun in December 1978 by the Sheridan Hills Baptist Church with Teofil Talpesh as pastor. In 1987 the congregation was constituted as a church and their new sanctuary dedicated. Additional Rumanian congregations have begun in the First Baptist churches of Hallandale and Hollywood.

Hungarian

The first Florida Baptist ministry for Hungarians was begun in Coral Gables Baptist Church, Miami during the early 60's under the pastorate of Ladislao Biro who later moved to Palm Bay to pastor a Hungarian Baptist church in that city.

In 1959 Joseph Matus, a Baptist pastor initiated a Hungarian church in St. Petersburg. Juluis Kun followed Matus as pastor in 1975 and led to the church cooperating with Southern Baptists. During his ministry the church was relocated and a new sanctuary and educational building completed.

Vietnamese

Vietnamese mission work in Florida grew out of the compassion and concern of Ed Segars, pastor of the Florida Shores Baptist Church, Orlando. Following the fall of Saigon in 1976, Segars led his church to resettle more than 60 Vietnamese and begin a mission among them. Pastors of the mission have been San Xuan Nguyen and Van Van Nguyen. In 1987 the mission relocated to the Fairvilla Baptist Church property. Congregations have also begun in Pensacola and Jacksonville.

Arabic

The Arabic work was initiated in the Flagami Baptist Church in 1976 with William Andraous, pastor. Two years later Andraous moved his ministry to West Palm Beach. In 1983 he resigned and was replaced by Abli Abraham in 1984 who continued in West Palm Beach until 1986 when he initiated an Arabic mission in the Trinity Baptist Church, Miami. The Arabic work has been very slow in developing.

Brazilian

Two missions were initiated for Brazilians in 1987-88. The First Spanish Baptist Church, Orlando sponsored a new mission in 1987 with Giovanni Silva as pastor. In January 1988, the Tamiami Baptist Church called Jose Heleno Silva to pastor their new Brazilian mission.

As of April 1988 there were 226 language congregations affiliated with the Florida Baptist Convention. These congregations have services in nineteen different languages as follows:

- 1 Arabic
- 2 Brazilian (Portuguese)
- 2 Cambodian (Khmer)
- 3 Chinese (Cantonese and Mandarin)
- 4 Filipino (Tagalog)

1	French Canadian
57	Haitian (Creole and French)
108	Hispanic (Spanish)
9	American Indian (Creek and Miccosukee)
1	Italian/Hispanic (English services)
4	Jamaican (English)
16	Korean
3	Romanian
1	Hungarian
4	Slavic (Russian and Ukranian)
3	Vietnamese
1	Laotian
<u>6</u>	Deaf (with pastors)
226	

In addition there are 61 total deaf ministries in Florida Baptist churches.

The total membership of language congregations stands at approximately 12,500. Thus the average number of members per congregation is 55.3.

A major priority for the future must be the evangelization of ethnic youth who are more fluent in English than in the native language of their parents and operate in a bi-lingual---bi-cultural world. Another major priority must be the evangelizing of the thousands of ethnics in Florida who may be more easily reached for Christ in English, but often with culture becoming a part of the congregationalizing process.

Compiled and Written

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