



LEGACY

Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists

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LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people, churches and events in Florida Baptist history. During the next several months this newsletter will feature the story of the development and ministry of the state Baptist news journal, *The Florida Baptist Witness*. The *Witness* was officially adopted and served as an entity of the Florida Baptist State Convention from 1884 until 2017 when it was dissolved as a State Convention agency. During its 133-year history the *Witness* had 33 editors (plus a number of associate editors) and its ownership moved on several occasions between private owners to control by the Convention corporation.



Jack E. Brymer 1984 – 1994

The decade of 1984 to 1994, to borrow a phrase from the Charles Dickens' observation, represented, "the best of times and the worst of times," for the *Florida Baptist Witness*. The "worst of times" came for Editor Jack E. Brymer, whose on-going reports on the theological and political upheaval that was gripping the Southern Baptist Convention from the late 1970s and continued into the 1990s.

Against that backdrop, Jack E. Brymer (b. 1936; d. 2020) [pictured] assumed the editorship of the *Florida Baptist Witness* on March 1, 1984. Brymer, a native of Alabama, became only the second professional journalist to assume leadership of Florida Baptists' state newspaper. He had served the 19 prior years as associate editor of the *Alabama Baptist* news-journal. Brymer had been selected by the Florida Baptist Witness Commission that sought to enlist a professional journalist who could lead in the expansion of the readership of the *Witness*, as well as provide original reporting.

As a reflection of the "best of times," Brymer, "brought a new perspective to the *Witness*," observed Jerry M. Windsor in a 2004 article published in the *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*. "His concern for fairness, full disclosure, honesty, and integrity in the tradition of our best kind of Christian journalism."



One of Brymer's immediate concerns was to re-design the look and content of the *Witness*. To that end, Brymer hired graphic designer Lindsay Bergstrom [pictured] of Texas to revamp the visual appearance of the weekly publication. As the state paper's first graphic designer, Bergstrom continually worked at improving the visual look for the next eleven years. Between September, 1994 and June, 1995, Bergstrom served as Acting Editor-Manager of the *Witness*.



The Focus Upon Informing Florida Baptists

"Information is imperative for Baptists," Brymer wrote in his first report to the Florida Baptist State Convention. That declaration became a mantra for the longtime religious news journalist who led the *Witness* for a decade. In his reports and editorials Brymer often stressed the importance of keeping pastors, church leadership and individual church members informed on what was taking place in the life of the denomination. But informing Florida Baptists had a prophetic downside. In a 1988 report, he wrote, that providing information is sometimes "an unpleasant assignment. Few people enjoy reading about controversy, especially in religious journals. But as someone has suggested, it is better to discuss an issue without settling it, than to settle an issue without discussing it. Local church autonomy mandates that Baptists receive a full account of what is taking place, even if it is unpleasant."

As a journalist first, Brymer covered events and issues primarily affecting Florida Baptists, as well as reporting on Southern Baptist Convention events. To beef up the *Witness*' news reporting resources, Brymer employed in October, 1985, as associate editor, Gregory D. (Greg) Warner (b. 1955), [pictured] another professional journalist and native of Lakeland. Warner became the newspaper's first associate editor who was actively engaged in news gathering and reporting. His role went beyond the work of prior *Witness*' assistant editors who primarily edited news received from local churches.



Between the two writers, the *Witness* published a variety of topical and investigative stories that gained positive recognition and for some articles, professional writing awards. The topics included: "When AIDS Comes to Church;" "Retooling Evangelism for the 1990s;" a "Child Sex Abuse" series; an investigative series on abortion; homosexuality; and ministerial burnout; among others.

Despite Brymer's efforts to improve the visual appearance and content of the newspaper, the downside was the challenge of securing sufficient subscribers to offset the rising costs of production and distribution. During the Brymer decade, the *Witness* Commission agreed to raise subscription rates several times and approved various strategies built around the "church budget," "church page," and "club" plans, as well as providing free trial subscriptions. Initially those efforts proved successful with the *Witness* reaching a circulation of 90,000 subscribers. Unfortunately, a downward trend in subscriptions began to occur with a drop to 82,000 in 1988, 80,000 in 1989 and 76,000 in 1990.

SBC Controversy Engulfed the *Witness*

The decline in subscriptions was initially attributed to national societal and cultural shifts, as Brymer cited the experience by state Baptist newspaper across the country which also were losing readership. However, the reporting of the "unpleasant news," Brymer spoke about at the beginning of his editorship, also had consequences.

In some ways, the decade beginning in 1979 was among the "worst of times" for the Southern Baptist Convention, which was in the midst of a controversy that grew out of a defense of the inerrancy of the Bible. But behind the scenes, there were on-going political-style tactics being employed to ensure the

election of certain “conservatives” as SBC president. Once the presidency was achieved, the process included a strategy to select the “right” persons to serve on the powerful Committee on Boards. The committee set about replacing trustees with individuals who were expected to remove from service certain administrators and selected professors of the Convention’s seminaries. Those efforts drew denominational and secular media coverage. An additional target of the media spotlight was some public and some “by invitation only” meetings involving leading SBC pastors. These and other on-going events resulted in what was believed by Brymer as “fair and balanced” reporting by the *Witness* and other state Baptist papers. In 1990 an alternative news reporting agency was organized by several state Baptist newspaper editors, called the Associated Baptist Press. The ABP was designed to report denominational news that Baptist Press, the official news agency of the SBC, was restricted from or chose not to report.

The Abrupt Resignation

In addition to both Warner and Brymer reporting on what was happening within the SBC controversy, the *Witness* carried additional stories prepared by the Associated Baptist Press. Those who supported and used ABP came to be identified in the SBC theological and political struggle as “moderates,” who supposedly were opposed to the “conservative” led changes. Initially various Florida pastors, including leaders of the larger churches, complained directly or in letters to the editor decrying the *Witness*’ reporting on the SBC controversy and the use of ABP as a source. Some *Witness* Commission members challenged the editor on the use of ABP articles. But the *Witness* continued to carry the ABP reports, as well as some original reporting by Warner and Brymer.

During the 1994 annual meeting of the *Witness* Commission a motion, directing the editor to discontinue use of ABP, was narrowly defeated. What had re-emerged among the nine-member Commission was its on-going debate on editorial freedom and the reports on the SBC controversy. The meeting ended with no resolution of the issue. Following the meeting Brymer, citing “continued harassment” by the commissioners, made the abrupt decision to resign as editor on August 26, 1994.

J.C. Mitchell, pastor of First Baptist Church, Winter Park, and a member of the Florida Baptist *Witness* Commission, observed that Brymer was “another casualty of the Southern Baptist Convention controversy.” Mitchell was interviewed by the *Orlando Sentinel* the week following Brymer’s resignation. Mitchell said, “A lot of conservative pastors were unhappy with him.” As a *Witness* Commissioner, Mitchell was among a majority that did not like the use of articles by the Associated Baptist Press being included in the *Witness*. “In my opinion, the ABP is slanted in favor of the moderate position,” Mitchell said at the time.

The week following the Commission meeting, the September 1 issue of the *Witness*, printed an editorial titled, “Resigning was painful, but not difficult.” Brymer explained, “Decisions by an editor on what should or should not be published must be made on the basis of facts, not perceptions. Granted, I have made mistakes in both facts and perceptions,” Brymer penned. “An editor must be guided by convictions, not convenience.”

Lance Anderson, chairman of the *Witness* Commission, reported to the 1994 State Convention annual meeting that Brymer’s resignation, “came as a result of a continuing struggle with a minority on the Commission that editorial policy be ignored and that information sources of the *Witness* be censored.”

After leaving the editorship of the *Witness*, Brymer moved to Birmingham where he was employed by Samford University. He served in various administrative roles until he retired in 2003. At the age of 84, Brymer died on October 28, 2020.