



FLORIDA BAPTIST
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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.

FLORIDA BAPTIST

Witness

Michael D. Chute 1995 – 2001

The brief six-year period of Michael Chute's editorship of the *Florida Baptist Witness* likely could be characterized as an era of calm over chaos, trust over suspicion and confidence over confrontation. Chute's focus upon traditional Baptist news provided a stark contrast to the final years of former editor Jack Brymer (see August, *LEGACY*). And although Chute was a strong advocate of diverse Florida Baptists' and Southern Baptists' news and feature stories – particularly international missions – his efforts did not appreciably affect the subscriber base of the *Witness* which remained in the mid-40,000 range.



Michael Chute (b. 1950), came to the *Witness* editorship from Oklahoma Baptist University (OBU), where he led the journalism department as a professor of journalism. Chute, who was on an extended leave from the SBC International Mission Board, also was working to complete requirements for a doctorate in mass communications. Up until his study leave at OBU, Chute had served 13 years as an SBC missionary in Brazil and then Hong Kong. In those roles he was both an overseas correspondent reporting on Southern Baptist mission work, as well as a communications consultant to missionary personnel. Previously, between 1978 and 1982, he served as the managing editor of the *Word and Way*, the state newspaper for Missouri Baptists.

When the Florida Baptist Witness Commission considered Chute for the *Witness* position, one of the strongest recommendations came from Bob Terry, editor of the *Word and Way*. Terry wrote,

“Mike [Chutes’] public image is that of a foreign missionary.” Terry went on to stress, “He would bring no political baggage with him to the editorship of the *Florida Baptist Witness*. As a foreign missionary, he would represent that which is the glue of our denomination.” Chute subsequently edited the *Witness* from June, 1995 to February, 2001.

A Missionary’s Heart

Without question, Michael Chute’s international missions’ experience was reflected in his editorials, the news stories selected for the *Witness*, and his efforts to promote subscriptions. In his June 8, 1995, editorial titled, “The *Witness*, a witness,” Chute set the tone of his viewpoint. He wrote, “A witness. That’s who Florida Baptists are. That’s what the churches are. That’s who the *Witness* commissioners are. And that’s who I am.” He went on to write that, “The goal of the *Florida Baptist Witness* will be to provide Florida Baptists with a resource for living out the Christian faith.” A review of the pages of the *Florida Baptist Witness* under Chute’s leadership revealed a heavy emphasis upon news coverage about international missions, home missions and the ministries of Florida Baptists. Denominational news, from outside Florida, was typically limited to reports on the sermons and business transacted during the annual meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention. It was evident that the *Witness*’ former coverage of controversial SBC news was a thing of the past. Now the emphasis was upon positive Baptist news, as Chute declared, because Florida Baptists “want to know what God is doing and in knowing are compelled by the Holy Spirit to do something to help.”

A Refreshed Appearance

In an effort to increase circulation, Chute redesigned the newspaper and worked hard to secure increased subscriptions. The 16-pages enhanced the *Witness*’ physical size which he increased to 11 inches by 17 inches – called a tabloid format – from the long-standing size of 8-1/2 by 11 inches. An increased use of color photographs and graphs were used in about one-third of the total issues. The enlarged format provided more space for news and feature articles, as well as space for revenue-generating advertisements.

In his efforts to promote the *Witness*, Chute made a continuing tour of the state’s Baptist associations seeking to garner awareness, confidence and trust in both the editor and the news published in the *Witness*. He used his international missions’ experiences as the basis for his appeals to potential subscribers for the weekly newspaper. However by the end of his tenure in 2001 the circulation of the *Witness* was still in the 43,000 range. Although, Chute claimed that the circulation figure represented 120,000 weekly readers.

Increased Staff

As Editor Chute travelled across Florida to promote the newspaper and to gather story material, he needed help to maintain the weekly publishing schedule. Lindsey Bergstrom, who had served as the acting editor-manager until Chute was employed, was assigned to a re-defined position as the assistant editor. Bergstrom served until February, 1996. A young news writer, Bonnie Verlander, was employed to develop Florida-oriented stories. In March, 1996 the *Witness* Board of Commissioners approved the employment of Keith Hinson of Alabama, to serve as associate editor. Unfortunately within five months, Hinson resigned to return to Alabama to resume service as a bi-vocational pastor.

In September, 1996, Shari Schubert, a news writer for the Missouri Baptist’s *Word and Way* newspaper, was named as the *Witness* news editor. Schubert supervised several news writers and field correspondents until October, 2000, when she resigned to return to Missouri. In early February, 2001, two women – Janice Backer and Sherry Selph – were employed to serve as assistant editors.

However by mid-February, 2001, Chute had resigned to accept a teaching and administrative position with William Carey College in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. By now Chute had completed the doctoral degree in mass communications from the University of Southern Mississippi. This terminal degree complemented his B.A. degree from OBU and the M.A. degree from Southwest Missouri State University. A family man, Michael and his spouse Katherine Marie Benge, have two children.

A Farewell Observation

In his final editorial Michael Chute provided a self-evaluation of the impact of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, under his editorship. “Throughout the state, people liked the new tone, direction and unapologetic missions’ emphasis of the paper. We got calls from other states asking about our success with advertising sales and circulation, as ours was one of the few state Baptist newspapers holding its own and not losing subscribers.” He went on to conclude, “Thank you for your help, your encouragement and your support in building a stronger state Baptist newspaper in Florida.”

– Series continues next month –