



LEGACY

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

Vol. 13

October, 2021

No. 10

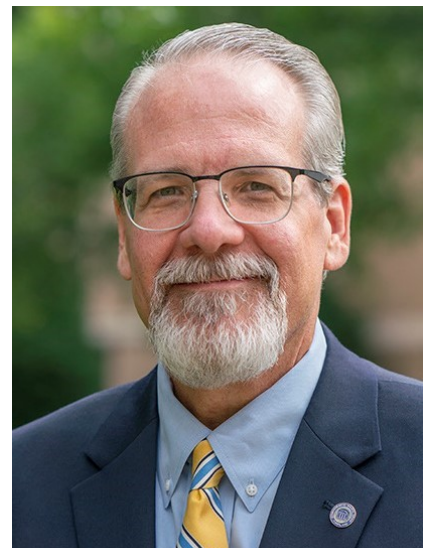
LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people, churches and events in Florida Baptist history. During the next several months this newsletter will feature the story of the development and ministry of the state 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.

Witness Florida Baptist Witness

James A. Smith, Sr., 2001 – 2013

The 21st century ushered in an era that reflected a growing cultural assault upon Christian values across America. The *Florida Baptist Witness*, under the editorship of James A. Smith, Sr., (b. 1964), attempted to push back against the “darkness” by being a champion for Biblical values. In his first editorial, Smith, who began his service February 5, 2001, laid out his promised goals as the newly designated executive editor of Florida Baptists’ newspaper. He committed to: (1) “knowing who we serve;” (2) “Being an effective tool for churches;” (3) “addressing critical theological issues;” and (4) “Covering ethical issues.” These were promises he upheld during his ensuing 12-years tenure, as he said he would by citing Jude 3, “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” That commitment translated into an on-going reporting of important social, moral and public policy/political issues with a Biblical interpretation. Such an emphasis was not confined to the editorial page as had been the practice of prior editors, but rather filled the news and feature pages.

The Norfolk, Virginia, native came to the *Witness* with a heightened awareness of the cultural war evolving in American life. That concern was sharpened during his service with the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, where he served as the director of government relations from 1989 to 1995. Before joining the Commission, Smith worked



two years as director of communications at the Republican Study Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives. His journalism skills were additionally honed, having served two Southern Baptist seminaries as a news and information specialist. These included Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from where he came to the *Witness* post.

Smith's education included a B.S. degree from Dallas (Texas) Baptist University (1987) and a master of divinity degree from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1999. His Florida connection was derived from his spouse, Linda Seabrooke (married May 23, 1987), whose parents lived in Florida.

Revised Mission Statement

Within a year of his election as executive editor, Smith led the *Witness*' Board of Commissioners to approve a new mission statement to publicly refine the role of the newspaper. That statement stated that the, "*Florida Baptist Witness* publishes Good News about God's work that edifies, educates, exhorts and empowers Florida Baptists to glorify God and extend His kingdom." In an editorial, Smith told his readers, "I believe this mission statement is an eloquent description of the work of your state Baptist newspaper." He went on to write, "The statement makes clear why we exist, as well as what we aspire to be and do as the official news-journal" of Florida Baptists. To underscore the new direction the *Witness* was taking and to garner increased subscriptions, Smith enlisted several influential pastors who wrote articles supporting the work and ministry of the *Witness*.

National Events Affected Florida Baptists

The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, came to dominate not only the reporting of secular media, but the *Florida Baptist Witness* issued an extra edition during that memorable week. It was the first extra edition ever published by the state Baptist newspaper. According to Smith, the events of September 11, were "greatly influencing the *Witness*' news coverage," which provided to its readers, "theological and spiritual insights on the attacks," which included reactions by Florida Baptists.

Subsequently, in September, 2001, two weekly columns were added that offered topical commentary on social, cultural and morality issues. One called "Break Point," written by Charles Colson, a convicted Watergate felon, who now served as the president of Prison Fellowship Ministries. The other column titled "Family" was written by nationally known James Dobson, founder of the Focus on the Family organization. Both columns continued for to be published for several years.

The year 2003 brought coverage of the war in Iraq which served as a springboard for stories about military personnel, the ministry of Christian chaplains, Iraqi refugees in Jordan and "reflections about this major issue in American life," Editor Smith noted. The same year the editor instituted what became annual reports on legislation having a morality or family life implication that was being considered or subsequently approved by the Florida Legislature. The issue of the sanctity of life was often reported through various anti-abortion related stories.

The most significant aspect of the sanctity of life topic was addressed for nearly a year in a series of stories about Terri Schiavo, 39-year-old brain damaged Clearwater woman at the center of a national debate on her quality of life and her so-called "right-to-die." Other social and public policy issues of interest to Florida Baptists, particularly the Florida Marriage Amendment to prevent same sex marriages, were regularly featured in the pages of the *Witness*. During election years, Smith not only reported on "exclusive" interviews with political candidates, but provided analysis of the candidates' position on social and moral issues.

Reporting on the Denomination

Denominational news did not take a "back seat" in receiving prime news coverage in the pages of the *Witness*. Smith regularly led with stories he initiated and wrote that addressed controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. These included, among other topics, the Southern Baptist International Mission Board's policy on "private prayer language/tongues;" the controversy over the

“sole membership” question debated between SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman and New Orleans Seminary President Charles Kelley; the alleged cultural insensitivity of “Rickshaw Rally” VBS materials; interviews leading up to and following the approval of the Great Resurgence Commission report and its implementation in Florida; and the failed attempt to change the name of Southern Baptists to “Great Commission Baptists.”

Expanded News Delivery by Technology

Initially the two-year effort to increase subscriptions to the *Witness* resulted in a 6,000 increase by the end of 2003. Editor Smith created and launched a *Witness* website which complemented a new design of the print edition. The editor said the changes were a partial fulfillment of the *Witness*' mission statement to more effectively reach and educate Florida Baptists. The website drew a significant increase in readers, but not necessarily paid subscriptions. By 2010 the *Witness* had established a presence on the social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook to further reach the Baptist and secular audiences. And in 2013 the *Witness* began Spanish language pages within the print and website editions of the state Baptist news-journal enhanced by the use of a Spanish language news writer. Yet such efforts never garnered significant growth in subscriptions or other revenue sources. In 2012, the *Witness* reported total paid subscriptions at 16,387 down from 43,000 reported in year 2000.

Joni Hannigan Brought Expanded News Coverage



Earlier, to strengthen its news reporting abilities, the *Witness* Commission in August, 2002, approved the hiring of Joni Hannigan as the managing editor. The California native was a trained journalist, free-lance writer and a high school English and journalism teacher. During her 12-years tenure (resigned March 31, 2014), Hannigan wrote many in-depth stories on a variety of news topics including: the Teri Schiavo life support saga; the extensive 2004-2005 hurricane season; missions' endeavors in the Middle East and Haiti as well as the Super Bowls in Florida; and numerous feature profiles stories on “godly men” and “godly women.” Both Hannigan and Editor Smith made a continuing priority to prepare and publish stories on the work and ministries of local Florida Baptist churches and their leadership. “If the *Witness* is not focused on assisting Florida Baptists in the local church, then there is no reason for its existence,” Smith once told his readers.

An Era Ends

In May, 2013, James Smith resigned as executive editor to accept a position at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as executive editor and chief spokesman for Seminary President Albert Mohler, Jr. Subsequently, in 2016 Smith was named vice president of communications for the National Religious Broadcasters organization. More recently, in 2019, Smith accepted the position of associate vice president for communications at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he currently serves.

– *Series continues next month* –