



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

Kevin Bumgarner 2014 – 2017

Kevin Bumgarner (b. 1966) holds the “unique” distinction as having served as the final editor of the print version of the *Florida Baptist Witness* before its 2017 dissolution as a cooperating ministry (agency) of the Florida Baptist State Convention.

Upon the recommendation of the State Board of Missions, messengers attending the November, 2017, State Convention meeting, approved the dissolution of the agency and affirmed the reassignment of its news reporting tasks as a ministry of the Florida Baptist Convention.

Since its founding in 1884, the *Witness*' editorship and operation moved back and forth between private ownership and the management oversight of the State Convention's State Board of Missions. In 1984, the *Witness* was made an official agency of the Florida Baptist State Convention and assigned a Board of Directors.



Although the 2017 State Convention action brought to an end to the 133-year history of the print version of the state Baptist newspaper, it was not the end of a communication medium providing news about Florida Baptists. On January 3, 2018, the re-formatted *Witness* debuted on the Florida Baptist Convention website (FlBaptist.org) as a completely digital publication.

However, prior to the *Florida Baptist Witness*' re-organization, Kevin Bumgarner served between February, 2014, and July, 2017, as the last executive editor of the *Witness*. During his brief tenure, Bumgarner worked to expand the news publications' presence on the dominating digital and social media platforms that had become the standard news sources for most consumers in the 21st century.

From Kansas to Hawaii

Following the resignation of James A. Smith, Sr., in 2013, the *Florida Baptist Witness* Board of Directors selected Kevin Bumgarner of Honolulu, Hawaii, as executive editor. During the prior four years Bumgarner had served as editor-in-chief of the *Pacific Business News*.

A native of Derby, Kansas, a small suburb outside Wichita, Bumgarner was a 1988 graduate of Wichita State University. In December of that year, Bumgarner married Melanie Moore. The couple had three children – two sons and a daughter. Interestingly, at the time of Kevin’s selection to lead the *Witness*, a brother – Bob Bumgarner – was serving as the lead strategist for the Florida Baptist Convention’s Church Health Group.

The Baptist layman garnered most of his journalism experience as an editor of various secular newspapers and news websites owned by American City Business Journals. Among those publications (and his years of service) were the *Pacific Business News* (2010 – 2014), the *Dallas Business Journal* (2007 – 2010) and the *Triad Business Journal* in Greensboro, N.C. (1998 – 2007). His previous experience also included serving as business editor of *The Huntsville (Ala.) Times* (1997-1998) and various positions with the *Wichita Business Journal* (1990 – 1997).

Digital Media Expansion

In his first *Witness* editorial, dated February 6, 2014, Bumgarner summarized his experience in journalism. Referring to his most recent leadership of the Hawaii publication, Bumgarner explained, “we literally rethought how we reported and presented news. In the process, we went from a newsroom focused on a weekly print product that supported a website on the side to a digital-first news organization with an emphasis on social media and an array of enhanced print products.”

A review of his three years leading the *Witness* confirms that Bumgarner attempted to implement a similar digital-first process for the *Witness*. Although former *Witness* Editor James Smith had initiated the use of some digital media, Bumgarner expanded it.

Bumgarner’s changes included: an enhanced website that carried exclusive stories that did not appear in the print edition; a YouTube channel that featured documentary-length videos featuring pastors and churches; a Facebook page and a Twitter account that were used to post breaking news. Access to those several digital mediums was available free of charge.

He also expanded the use of Spanish language stories carried in the *Witness*’ print and website venues; a practice that had been begun by former Editor Smith. And although a re-designed print version of the *Witness* in a tabloid format (17 by 11 inches) was continued with the use of color on selected pages, the frequency of publication was reduced to a monthly from twice-monthly.

Baptist Layman Perspective

Apart from the diverse delivery mediums, Bumgarner told his readers in 2014 about his Christian life experiences serving as a layman in local churches, which he said, “helped form my framework for seeing how God works through the local church, and under my stewardship the *Florida Baptist Witness* will do everything in its power to strengthen and encourage the work . . .” of Southern Baptist churches across Florida. Ordained as a deacon at Life Community Church in Jamestown, N.C. in 2007, Bumgarner had a long history of ministry as a layman and volunteer worker at various Baptist churches in Texas and Hawaii.

A review of the pages of the *Witness*, during Bumgarner’s brief tenure, reflected a commitment to highlight the life and ministries of local Baptist churches. Taking advantage of the state newspaper’s tabloid page format (17 inches high and 11 inches wide that opened to 22 inches) emphasis was placed on the use of large and multiple photographs to complement the longer story narratives. This layout design sought to gain the reader’s attention of the missions and ministry story of Florida Baptists, as well as missionary activities of Southern Baptists. Even his editorials lifted up the ministry of local churches often by relating his personal experiences as a committed layman and church volunteer.

Witness Undergoes Transition

In August, 2017, Bumgarner, age 51, announced that, “In the midst of this relatively short journey [leading the *Witness*], God has recently redirected me.” He told of his call to serve as director of communications at Bell Shoals Baptist Church in Brandon, Florida. Subsequently, in 2020, he accepted the duo position of editor and publisher of the *Kodiak (Alaska) Daily Mirror*.

Following Bumgarner’s departure the *Witness* Board of Directors undertook an assessment of the state Baptist newspaper. Major considerations were the dwindling subscription base – 15,000 in 2017 down from 42,000 in 1997 – and reductions in income from other sources, including the annual \$284,000 in Cooperative Program subsidy provided by the Florida Baptist Convention. In the September, 2017, issue of the *Witness*, Board of Directors’ Chairman Shelly Chandler, pastor of First Baptist Church, Bonifay, reported on a proposal the Board had approved.

Chandler said a plan proposed by Dr. Tommy Green, executive director treasurer, Florida Baptist Convention, would be for the *Witness* to be transferred to the oversight of the Convention. At the heart of the proposal was to make the *Witness* an all-digital platform that would be available free of charge for all to use and would encourage story contributions from readers.

As a part of the Convention’s overall communications strategy, Green promised to add staff to help gather and report the stories on Florida Baptist churches and leadership. This action would return the ownership oversight of the *Witness* to the Florida Baptist Convention corporation, under whose auspices the *Witness* had functioned several times in its 133-year history. Except now, the newspaper would not have its own independent editor/business manager, but rather Convention-employed writers.

State Convention Affirms Transition

The State Board of Missions, during its August 24-25, 2017 meeting, approved the agreement between the Board of Directors, *Florida Baptist Witness*, and Executive Director Treasurer Tommy Green for the Convention corporation to assume all the assets of the *Witness*, as well as assume responsibility for continued “publication” of the *Witness* as a news medium for Florida Baptists. The State Board also approved two recommendations for consideration by messengers to the 2017 Florida Baptist State Convention.

During the State Convention annual meeting on November 14, messengers considered and approved the two State Board recommendations. One was a revision to the Constitution, Florida Baptist State Convention, by which it deleted the reference to the *Florida Baptist Witness* as a cooperating ministry (agency). The second approved action was a revision to the State Convention Bylaws by deleting a reference to the Board of Director of *Florida Baptist Witness*.

As a result of the agreements and the subsequent actions by the State Convention, the last two print versions of the *Witness* were prepared and issued in November and December. And in January, 2018, the all-digital version of the *Florida Baptist Witness* premiered and continues to the present day. The focus of these stories are features on pastor, laity and local churches and their ministry activities. Other than annual reports on the State Convention annual meeting and the actions by the State Board of Missions, little other denominational news is reported.

Doubtless this is a 133-year-old state Baptist newspaper that has undergone good and, at times, difficult changes. With each of the 33 editors – some with a business motivation or others having a journalist’s perspective – they all made transitional changes in an effort to make the *Witness* a vital communications medium for Florida Baptists. And even today, after a few decades into the 21st century, with an emphasis upon a digital delivery system, the *Witness* continues to fulfill its original mandate – to report to Florida Baptists about the mission and ministry of Florida Baptists.

– This series on the editors of the Florida Baptist Witness concludes. –

*The Journal of
Florida Baptist
Heritage*

Florida Baptist Historical Society



*The Legacy of "Firsts" Among
Florida Baptists*

Notice to Members – The 2021 *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage* has been published and mailed (via media mail) to all Society members. If you have not received your copy of the *Journal*, please let us know by contacting Penny Baumgardner at telephone 850-360-4179 or Email Society2@FloridaBaptistHistory.org.

The theme of the 2021 *Journal* is the **Legacy of "Firsts" Among Florida Baptists**. Featured is a lead story on the early history of the Pigeon Creek Primitive Baptist Church which was the first Baptist church established in the Florida Territory in 1821. Several other articles profile early pastors of the Pigeon Creek Church. Additionally, there are articles on the development of Primitive and Missionary Baptists and their respective theological positions. And finally, there are several articles on other "firsts" in Florida Baptists' history.

