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Donald S. Hepburn, Managing Director

Penny Baumgardner, Administrative Ministry Assistant

PO Box 95, Graceville, Florida 32440/Phone: 850.360.4179

Email: Society1@FloridaBaptistHistory.org

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The Legacy of Florida Baptists’ Sunday School Ministry

As a 10-year-old boy growing up in St. Petersburg, Florida, the religious influences upon my young life were minimal by a divorced mother struggling to support herself and her son. At an early age I was encouraged by the example of my mother to work for the financial requirements I may have had. To that end, I signed on as a newspaper (boy) seller of the city’s *Evening Independent* which was the six-day afternoon newspaper. Rather than being assigned a door-to-door delivery route, I chose to station myself on the front steps of the local hospital, then called Mound Park (now the Bayfront Medical Center). The hospital was mere blocks from my mother’s garage apartment. It was there one afternoon, that I had an “appointment” with one of God’s witnesses that changed my life.

I don’t recall her name, but a sweet older woman with grandmotherly white hair approached me on the hospital steps. She asked my name and if I lived nearby, to which I responded. She then asked if I went to Sunday school. Of course, I had not heard of such, only the regular public school. She invited me to come with her the next Sunday to the nearby church’s Sunday school program. I said my mother would have to give me permission. This sweet woman later visited my home to talk to my mother and offered to provide a ride to the nearby Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, which was only six blocks from my home. My mother approved and the following Sunday the woman took me to church.

Needless to say, that initial introduction to the Sunday school and the church, ultimately led to my commitment to faith in Jesus Christ. That faith commitment was the result of the visit and witness in my home by “Junior department” Sunday school teacher Grady Ray. Mr. Ray was more than a teacher; he was a mentor to me as I spiritually grew into my teenage “intermediate” years. Between the ages of 10 and 18,

PREFACE

the Sunday school teachers, the youth ministry volunteer workers and the pastoral staff at the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church provided profound and spiritually enriching experiences upon my life. It was in this setting I came to respond to God's call upon my life to follow His leadership in educational pursuits and career opportunities with several Southern Baptist institutions.

No doubt I have been blessed and led by God in a wonderful journey through my young and adult life. I owe much for the spiritual influence, encouragement and prayers by the godly people of the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church. But I shall be eternally grateful for that nameless white hair lady who stopped and spoke to me about my spiritual condition one Spring afternoon. As a result, the Sunday school became more than a place of Bible studies and spiritual development. It was a "home" where I learned how to develop into a Christ follower.

My commitment and regular involvement in Sunday school continued through the last six decades of my life as I have moved across the country and joined local Southern Baptist churches. First as a pupil in the "junior" and "intermediate" classes, then as a college and seminary student attending Bible study classes. During my adult years, I have been a regular Sunday school student, as well as a teacher, occasional Sunday school leader, bus ministry worker and V.B.S. worker. The value and role of the Sunday school ministry has been life-changing not only for me, but for generations of Florida Baptists as well.

In recognition of the significance of the Sunday school movement, this issue of the *Journal* seeks to highlight that legacy in the development of the Florida Sunday school ministry and the contributions made to that ministry by several persons./D.S.H., editor.

Baptist Heritage Award

2022 Baptist Heritage Award



The Florida Baptist Historical Society, for the past 26 years, has recognized individuals for their effective preservation and promotion of Florida Baptist history. The Society's Board of Directors is pleased to announce that their selection as the recipient of the 2022 Baptist Heritage Award is Carolyn L. Calhoun of St. Augustine, Florida.

The Baptist Heritage Award seeks to recognize and honor those Florida Baptists who have exhibited rare and unusual dedication to the cause of Florida Southern Baptist history by having made a significant impact through such means as researching and writing Baptist history, teaching Baptist history, preserving Baptist history, and/or promoting the importance of Florida Southern Baptist history.

The 2022 Baptist Heritage Award recipient, is a noteworthy individual who has committed herself to the preservation and promotion of her local church's history. Carolyn L. (Mrs. Edward) Calhoun, is a lifelong member of the Ancient City Baptist Church, St. Augustine, having made a profession of faith at age 10. She has worked diligently since the last century to collect, organize and preserve the history of the church that was established in 1887. Although there exists a published history of the church written by the church's History Committee – titled *A Long Road with God . . . 1887 to 1987* – Mrs. Calhoun has researched and identified numerous basic facts that are missing from the church's history book. She developed, a recently published, chronological narrative of the church's early history and added supplemental information bringing the church's history narrative to a contemporary status.

Baptist Heritage Award

Additionally, to promote the church's history to benefit current members, Mrs. Calhoun enlisted other volunteers to establish a designated history room with a display of early information and memorabilia about the Ancient City Baptist Church. This task required the sorting and assessing of unorganized material stashed in dozens of boxes. Mrs. Calhoun's volunteer leadership has been enhanced by over two decades of service on the church's History Committee, whose members have worked to collect and preserve the history of the church.

Prior to her history-preservation volunteer service in the church, Mrs. Calhoun, age 78, served a variety of other volunteer positions in the church including as a Sunday School teacher of various age groups over the years, worked on several church committees and currently is a church greeter. Mrs. Calhoun's professional career for over twenty years was devoted as a reading specialist teacher for the St. Johns' County School Board. She attended the then called St. Johns Junior College and subsequently graduated from the Flagler College with a degree in Education. She did additional study at the University of North Florida to secure credentials as a Reading Specialist to teach grade school children who lacked age-appropriate reading skills.

Twenty-five individuals, since 1997, have been conferred the Baptist Heritage Award by the Florida Baptist Historical Society. These persons represented a broad range of Florida Baptists including pastors, denominational workers, college and seminary professors, and laypersons, all of whom had an interest and commitment to researching and publishing Florida Baptist history.

Baptist Heritage Award

The following individuals are former Heritage Award recipients:

1997 - Earl Joiner
1998 - Adolph Bedsole
1999 - Joe Bamberg
2000- Ruth Bagwell
2001 - John Hillhouse
2002- Martha Trotter
2003- Wiley Richards
2004- E. B. Browning, Sr.
2005- E. H. Rennolds, Sr.
2006- Harry C. Garwood
2007- Pope Duncan
2008- John L. Rosser
2009- Doak Campbell
2010 - Judith Jolly
2011 - Jack Dalton
2012 - James C. Bryant
2013 - David Elder
2014 - Mark Rathel
2015 - No recipient
2016 - David Lema and Roger Richards
2017 - Jerry M. Windsor
2018 - Sid Smith
2019 - Thomas A. Kinchen
2020- L. David Cunningham
2021 – Donald S. Hepburn

Our Mission:



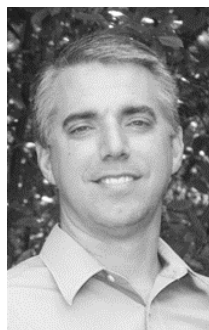
Serving Churches

In fulfilment of our Mission to research, preserve and promote the Legacy of Florida Baptists, the Society assists leadership of Florida Baptist churches and associations in a variety of ways:

- ◆ the research of local church and association histories;
- ◆ the research of pastoral leader biography;
- ◆ provide resources for publishing a history; and
- ◆ encourage and assist churches and associations to celebrate their respective heritage and anniversaries.

Originally the Sunday School Movement Sought to Provide Basic Reading and Writing Skills to Children

*by Joel Breidenbaugh, PhD
Pastor, Gospel Centered Church
Apopka, Florida*



What comes to your mind when you hear the words “Sunday school?” As a lifelong part of Southern Baptist churches, my mind gets flooded with two types of memories. One memory is me as a boy riding the church bus as my dad picked up kids throughout town to bring them to Sunday school and church. Once we arrived at the church, we kids would run to our classrooms to meet our teachers for the morning. Each teacher was always happy to see us, and they were ready to teach us about various Bible stories, equipped with pictures or posters of that day’s lesson. I distinctly remember several of the ladies and a few of the men who taught me in Sunday school while I grew from childhood to youth. That set of memories is always fond.

The second type of memory I have of Sunday school is of the churches I have served as a pastor. They are memories of the people who came to Sunday school with Bible in hand, ready to learn more about God’s Word. These memories include adults I interacted with to help train or encourage them for giving of their time. Most of those memories are fond, but a few are frustrating. Once a teacher told me she was going to quit teaching because she did not like the change we made to the literature. I had another person yell at me for forcing him to teach a church-wide study for a few weeks because we were messing with his own personal teaching schedule.

When we look at the birth and growth of the Sunday school movement, it experienced some of the same things I have witnessed. There exists both fond moments that would make



Robert Raikes

any Christian proud and frustrating moments that would discourage the biggest optimist. I hope to be able to touch on some things so that you can find that most of the moments in the Sunday school's early development brings memories of fondness.

Almost all of the largest and most influential churches in Florida Baptist life have had significant Sunday school ministries. When the world was drastically changed with the coming of the coronavirus, most churches paused their weekly gatherings for several months, moving their preaching to an online-only format. But several Sunday school classes, especially with adults, continued to meet via Zoom and other online video formats. The relationships people have in their Sunday school classes (or Life Groups or whatever nomenclature used) have continued to be meaningful during the pandemic, possibly more so than ever.

Because of the significance of the Sunday school movement, it can be helpful to trace its historical origins and development. Because of the limitations of this project, this article will focus on the development of the Sunday school movement from its origins in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries up to its adoption by Southern Baptists in the mid-nineteenth century.

Jesus and the Apostles

Many readers might question why a study of the origin and development of the Sunday school movement would begin with Jesus and the Apostles. H. F. Cope rightly noted,

“The pedigree of the Sunday-school is to be traced in principles rather than in institutions. It is seen in the practical expression of the principle of the religious instruction of the young. Early Christianity made provision for this instruction in at least three ways: (1) in the home, (2) in the synagogue schools, and (3) in the catechetical schools.”¹

The last words Jesus spoke before ascending into heaven have been called the Great Commission. It covers evangelism to all nations and “teaching them to observe everything [Jesus] commanded,” for those who receive the gospel and are baptized into the name of the Triune God (see

Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus' plan for building His church includes both evangelism and education in the Christian faith.

**This teaching by the
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Christian education**

This teaching by the Lord Jesus Christ became foundational to Christian education especially in the Early Church. We see this reality when we read

about the first Christians after Pentecost and how “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42). The apostolic teaching centered on the gospel of the Lord Jesus (see 1 Corinthians 15:3-8; Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Timothy 3:16; etc.). In fact, the rest of the New Testament after the Gospels and Acts was written as an expression of teaching the Christian faith to churches and their leaders. The apostles not only taught the faith but defended and contended for the faith (see 1 Peter 3:15; Jude 3).² While much more could be said of the apostles educating believers in the faith, suffice it to say they helped build the foundation for the future Sunday school movement.

Robert Raikes’ Contributions

While instruction in the Christian faith certainly occurred over the next several centuries, this teaching was led by vocational pastors and teachers in the church. Fast forward some 1700 years and we begin to see the birth of the Sunday school movement. It, too, would be led by paid teachers initially, but it would eventually become rooted in volunteer lay people educating children and adults.³

Father of Sunday School?

Robert Raikes of Gloucester, England, is often called the “Father of Sunday school” for his work beginning in 1780, but that claim has created no small discussion. When earlier historians sought to trace the origin of the Sunday school movement, they were surprised to uncover the following:

“(1) that it is customary to speak of Robert Raikes as the ‘father of this great movement’; (2) that there were Sunday-schools flourishing in several places, centuries before Raikes, and that long before his birth there were several in his own country; (3) that the Sunday-schools of our day, in which we often honor Raikes, are in scarcely any particularity like the ones he founded.”⁴

Frank Booth contends there were numerous examples of adults committed to the Christian training of children on Sundays as early as the 1650s and the examples grew from 1735-1780.⁵ The majority of Booth’s examples come from the clergy, which was part of the vocational tradition dating back to the Early Church. Booth cites at least two English role models in a Mrs. Cappe in Bedale in 1765 and Hannah Ball of Buckinghamshire in 1769 as lay people who were educating children on Sundays prior to Raikes’ work.⁶

Another point of note, as will be seen below, Raikes’ schools in Gloucester usually focused on educating the poor in reading and writing. The real Sunday school

Raikes’ schools in Gloucester usually focused on educating the poor in reading and writing

movement rarely taught those subjects, instead focusing on teaching the Bible. Henry F. Cope honors Raikes, not as the inventor or perfecter of the Sunday school movement, “but as its prophet.”⁷

Raikes’ Plan

Robert Raikes had a concern for the poor to be educated on Sunday.⁸ He had already tried to reform adults in prison, but he did not have much success.⁹ Once he turned his attention to children, “he very soon found that he was on the right track.”¹⁰ Although leaders like George Whitefield and John Wesley had tried to address the masses in Gloucester, they found no success. Raikes realized the children were free



from employment on Sundays and they spent their time making noise, rioting, destroying property, cursing, and swearing.¹¹ After Raikes talked with the Rev. Thomas Stock, “they found some poor, but respectable, women

[who would be paid one shilling per week] who would teach children on Sundays, and then they visited some parents in the city slums, and induced them to send their children to these good women instead of turning them into the streets.”¹² Raikes experimented for three years, from 1780-1783, teaching the children how to behave, clean their faces, and comb their hair. He eventually separated the boys and girls. Once Raikes had seen his results, he was ready to inform the world. He wrote about his plan in *The Gloucester Journal* on November 3, 1783.¹³

Raikes desired his movement to spread elsewhere. John Wesley noted in 1784 that these schools were appearing wherever he traveled, and sections of the countryside were divided into districts for leaders to check on them to see their progress. Wesley added by 1787, “these schools will be one great means of reviving religion throughout the kingdom.”¹⁴ Of course, Wesley’s own Methodist churches would help provide a greater connection to the churches (noted later in this article).

The Sunday Schools’ Shift to Bible Education

Whereas Raikes focused on educating needy children on Sundays so they could have a better future – and Sunday was the day businesses were closed and adults were available to help teach – other Christians saw the opportunity to teach the Bible on Sundays to children. The emphasis on teaching the Bible on the Lord’s Day eventually took precedence over teaching the other subjects. As an aside, due to Raikes’ work,

adults and families now saw the need for children to be taught in a structured setting. Thus, “the Sunday-school might well claim the public school as one of its children.”¹⁵

In the United States, a group was formed in Philadelphia in 1791 called the First Day Society. Their primary focus was to teach people of any age how to read and write. To accomplish this feat, they relied on reading the Bible. Like the work in England, some of the first Sunday schools in America tended to help with basic educational skills.

The Impact of the Second Great Awakening

Shortly after the Sunday school movement got its start, the Second Great Awakening broke out throughout the United States. This movement generally lasted from around 1795 until 1835. With this revival, American Evangelicalism evolved into a much more cooperative spirit to advance the gospel, especially among such groups as Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. Part of that advance came in the formation of numerous institutions and societies. One institution was an evangelical-oriented Sunday school and one of the societies to promote it was the American Sunday School Union (ASSU).¹⁶ Evangelical churches would no longer be content to teach basic reading and writing through the Sunday school, but they would educate people in Christian doctrine from the Bible.

The earliest evangelical efforts through the Sunday school were strongest in places like Philadelphia, which was home not only to a significant number of churches, but it was also home to the ASSU. While only 2.2 percent of the U.S. children population were enrolled in a Sunday school in 1825, a whopping 20 percent of Philadelphia children were in ASSU schools. By 1832, the number jumped to 7.9 percent of U.S. children and 27.9 percent of Philadelphia children!¹⁷

American Evangelical Success

When historians consider the Sunday school movement in both Great Britain and the United States, it quickly becomes apparent why American churches experienced much greater success with the organization. First, British churches did not budget for it, nor did they elect its officers. American churches saw the value of Sunday school and put funds in place for its effect. They also elected leadership from the local church.

Second, English Sunday schools were connected to the influence of Robert Raikes and his schools originated outside the churches. Sunday schools in America were birthed by the churches and were always connected to the church.

Third, the British schools were largely philanthropic, helping educate children and adults in secular subjects to help them advance in life. By and large, the American Sunday schools aimed at Christian education.¹⁸

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nineteenth century**

Fourth, whereas both English and American Sunday schools focused on education of some sort, American churches also learned to evangelize and seek conversion of children in the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Finally, the

English schools started with paid teachers and only moved to volunteers when they did not have the funds to support this work.²⁰ American schools relied on volunteer teachers from the beginning, possibly due to a lack of funds in general during the time of the American Revolution and subsequent years.²¹

Development of the Sunday School Movement in America

Once churches began incorporating Sunday school as a vital part of their ministry, numerous unions and societies sprang up to aid local churches in their task. Some of these organizations were started in the larger cities, including Philadelphia, New York, and Pittsburgh. The Sunday and Adult School Union formed in 1817. The American Sunday School Union began in 1824.²² In time, these organizations moved beyond the northeastern United States to encompass churches in the coastal South, the Midwest, and the Mississippi Valley.

When it came to Sunday school teachers, both men and women were involved in the early stages with a slight majority being women in places like Philadelphia and New York.²³ This slight majority would grow into a super majority a few decades later “whereby Protestantism became ‘feminized’ in the nineteenth century.”²⁴ The literature supplied to the teachers “seldom offered specific pedagogical advice of the type so familiar to twentieth-century teachers,” but provided “general commentary and exhorted readers toward spiritual growth.”²⁵

Baptists in the South

While Baptists in the North were located in larger cities and had greater financial means to publish and distribute Sunday school literature, churches in the South utilized those resources to educate and equip their people through Sunday school. Black Americans benefitted tremendously from these Sunday schools,

especially when the emphasis included reading and writing. Unfortunately, as slave owners discovered how much their slaves were learning, they all but ended their educational

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opportunities, and the percentage of Black adults and children decreased dramatically from 1818 until 1847.²⁶

Many American Baptists traced their societal work to the 1814 Triennial Convention, which formed for the sole purpose of supporting foreign missions. Based in Philadelphia, this mission-minded denomination quickly began to adopt the Sunday school movement as a way both to educate Christians and evangelize non-Christians in fulfilling the Great Commission.

Southern Baptist Convention

Shortly after the Southern Baptist Convention formed in 1845, having broken ties with their Northern brethren over the issue of slavery. The Southern Baptist Publication Society began in 1847 and helped promote the work of Sunday school. Unfortunately, it would cease to exist by 1864 due to the financial hardships of the Civil War.

Southern Baptists faced numerous challenges in the 1850s and 1860s when it came to Sunday school work. Because of the split from the Northern Baptists in 1845, Southern loyalists pushed for their own Sunday school organization in the 1850s. In 1855, the Southern Baptist Convention gave the newly formed Southern Baptist Bible Board the task of promoting Sunday school. Such work was still being carried on by the Southern Baptist Publication Society and additional Sunday school promotion work was done by the Southern Baptist Domestic Board in 1859. If those organizations were not enough, A.C. Dayton led the Landmark-influenced Southern Baptist Sunday School Union in Nashville in 1857. All of these organizations would eventually fade from the scene when the Baptist Sunday School Board, now LifeWay Christian Resources, would take on this work by the late eighteenth century.²⁷

Conclusion

I hope this historical journey has benefitted you with the origin and early development of the Sunday school

movement. I also pray it gives you encouragement and resolve to continue that kind of ministry in your own church both for education and evangelism.

I left out a fond childhood memory regarding Sunday school. On Saturday evenings, my dad often picked up half a dozen chocolate-covered, cream-filled donuts as an extra incentive for my two brothers and me to get ready on Sunday morning so we would leave early on the bus routes. That special treat only happened on Sundays, and it was always in conjunction with going to Sunday school. Our stomachs were well fed as we prepared to have our souls fed well with God's Word. I believe every Florida Baptist could say a hearty "Amen!" to that!

ENDNOTES:

¹ Cope, Henry Frederick, *The Evolution of the Sunday School* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1911), 15.

² For Jesus as a teacher, see Joel Breidenbaugh, *Preaching for Bodybuilding: Integrating Doctrine and Expository Preaching for the 21st Century* (Orlando: Renovate Publishing Group, 2016), 85-89. For the apostles as teachers, see *ibid.*, 89-97.

³ While much could be written about how the Early Church, Medieval Church, Reformation Church, and post-Reformation Church contributed to Christian education in the churches, that is beyond the scope of this article.

⁴ Cope, 49.

⁵ Frank Booth, *Robert Raikes of Gloucester* (Surrey: National Christian Education Council, 1980), 74-78.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁷ Cope, 51.

⁸ Multiple historians have challenged this title being applied to Robert Raikes. They claim there were similar works of Sunday education happening both in Great Britain and in America several years prior to his work; see Alfred Gregory, *Robert Raikes: Journalist and Philanthropist: A History of the Origin of Sunday-Schools* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1881), 35-40, 106-107.

⁹ See Gregory, 22-34.

¹⁰ J. Henry Harris, *Robert Raikes: The Man Who Founded the Sunday School* (London: The Sunday School Union, nd), 62.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 64-65; Gregory, 68.

¹² Harris, 66-67.

¹³ See Cope, 47; Harris, 79. Additional works on Raikes' life include John Carroll Power, *The Rise and Progress of Sunday Schools: A Biography of Robert Raikes and William Fox* (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1863).

¹⁴ From Wesley's Diary quoted in Gregory, 76.

¹⁵ Cope, 56.

¹⁶ See Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790-1880* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 1-10.

¹⁷ *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1972), Series A119-134, A143-157; Philadelphia Sunday and Adult School Union, *Seventh Annual Report* (Philadelphia, 1824), 68-72; American Sunday School Union, *First Annual Report* (Philadelphia, 1825), 22-27, and *Eighth Annual Report* (1832), 43-51, as cited in Boylan, 11.

¹⁸ See Cope, 76-77.

¹⁹ Boylan, 14-15.

²⁰ See Gregory, 99-100.

²¹ Because the newly formed American states rejected a state-church, the churches could not rely on state funding the way most of Christendom had done. This reality promoted voluntarism during this time period, as noted in Bruce Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2nd edition (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 343.

²² Cope, 83.

²³ See Boylan, 115.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁶ See the discussion in *Ibid.*, 24-27.

²⁷ For the background to these different organizations within Southern Baptist life, see Robert A. Baker, *The Story of the Sunday School Board* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1966), 3-46.

Florida Baptists' Sunday School Ministry: Part 1 (1843 – 1915)

*by L. David Cunningham
Freelance writer
Jacksonville, Florida*



The Sunday school movement, according to some historians, was born in a fire storm of controversy in 1780 with Robert Raikes of Gloucester, England, gathering unruly “street urchins” on Sunday for his “attempts at civilization,” where he hired teachers for instruction in academics. “His first efforts were met with criticism on all fronts, especially from the clergy who seemed to be threatened by this new work. He and his schools were dubbed ‘Bobby Wildgoose and his ragged regiment.’”¹

Today – over 230 years later – skeptics are still casting doubt on the value of Bible study through Sunday school. But the value speaks for itself. The Sunday school ministry is the most effective informal leadership development process in a church, and wise clergy and laymen alike will do well to cast their energies and enthusiasm into the movement. Sunday school has been effective in evangelism, and is of limited value without this objective. New research has shown where pastoral and church leaders are committed to Sunday school and personally invest in the work without reservation, the results are always positive. Today’s Sunday school movement is the beneficiary of a legacy of commitment by Florida Baptists to develop this local church ministry. Following are a Part 1 article and the subsequent Part 2 article that presents an abbreviated history of the development of the Sunday school ministry within Florida.

The Beginnings

The story of the beginnings of the Sunday school movement among Florida Baptists is a saga that began at two separate ends of the state without any known knowledge of each other. The first Sunday school in Florida likely began functioning by 1843 in north Florida’s Panhandle region at the Providence Baptist Church in Gadsden County. Within a year, in 1844, a second Sunday school



was begun in the extreme southern end of the state at the First Baptist Church of Key West.

Citing an article in the June 27, 1900 issue of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, Florida Baptist Historian Jack Dalton wrote in his PhD dissertation, “Possibly, the Providence Baptist Church of Gadsden County had one of the first permanent Sunday schools in Florida. This church was organized in 1843 and reported an ‘evergreen’ Sunday school prospering.”² The moniker of “evergreen” typically signified that the Bible teaching activity was held in the spring and summer months when field crops were growing and green.

“In Florida’s early days middle (north) Florida was the center of the states’ population, wealth and culture. The economy was of the plantation type. Its area, in the main, lay within the counties

of Jackson, Gadsden, Leon, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison; and because of the excellent people who migrated there from the Carolinas, Virginia, Georgia and Tennessee, that region assumed the leadership which it maintained for many years in the life of Florida.”³

**Providence Baptist
Church of Gadsden
County had one of the
first permanent
Sunday schools in
Florida**

The record of the Sunday school established in Key West was the result of the ministry of Charles C. Lewis, a sea captain from Connecticut, who had been licensed to preach by a Baptist church in that state.

During one of his voyages to the Florida Keys, Lewis began a Baptist work in Key West, organizing a congregation of 23 members in 1843. Lewis had to return to Connecticut later that year, and G. G. Tripp, an employee of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, became pastor and established a Sunday school in 1844.⁴ Key West had been settled in 1823 when “merchants came from Rhode Island, Virginia, and North Carolina to develop . . . a salvage business.”⁵ However, the church was primarily comprised “by people from Connecticut who came to the city while engaged in the business of fishing in the waters off the Florida Keys.”⁶ Meeting in the Monroe County Courthouse, “they sent one of their church members north to raise money to build a Sunday school building.”⁷ A total of \$800.00 was raised, but on the return trip the man and the money were lost at sea.⁸ As a missionary, Tripp “stayed only a few months, and the Sunday school died,”⁹ and the church became inactive.

Subsequently, in October, 1845 H. D. Doolittle brought together the scattered Key West flock, consisting of whites and blacks. During the period when the church was without a pastor, the blacks had continued to hold prayer meetings each week and had preaching by Austin Smith, a slave who had been licensed to preach by Lewis. With the help and support of these faithful blacks, Doolittle re-organized the Sunday school begun earlier by Tripp, with about 100 members.”¹⁰

Sunday School Ministry Expands

The next known Sunday school was organized at Rehoboth Baptist Church in Washington County, also located in the Florida

Panhandle. Although only two years old in 1849, *Minutes* of the West Florida Association recorded Rehoboth as the only church “that sustains a Sabbath school.”¹¹ The church had received thirty-five new members during the year, which resulted in some attention in the associational meeting regarding “the value of the Sunday school.”¹² Four years later, the Rehoboth Sunday school was renamed as the Orange Hill Sunday School Missionary Society.¹³

By 1856 Sunday school work in the West Florida Association was reported by three churches: Greenwood, New Hope and Orange Hill.¹⁴ Those named schools, plus one at Brooksville Baptist Church in the Alachua Association, organized on October 10, 1857, are the only reported schools for that year. In those early years, other schools were reported as statistics in Association annuals, but the specific churches and their location were not identified.

“In order to stimulate the establishment of now called ‘Sabbath Schools,’ a group of men offered a prize to the best organized school established within the West Florida Association before the 1857 meeting. The first prize was a ten-dollar Sabbath School library; second prize, a five-dollar library. In addition, W. W. Odom promised fifteen and ten copies, respectively, of the ‘Child’s Book’ to the winners. When the awards were made first prize went to Greenwood and second to Sardis.”¹⁵ By the next year eight schools were functioning in the association, two schools in Greenwood, New Hope, Sardis, Orange Hill, Chattahoochee, Bethlehem and Apalachicola.¹⁶

The contribution of Sunday school to the general education process in the 1800’s is difficult to grasp today. Sunday school was more than Bible study. It was an opportunity for adults to learn to read, primarily the Bible. Even in the early 1900’s it was not uncommon for agricultural adults to be illiterate, and the opportunity for their children to learn the alphabet through Sunday school was a God send for many families. This may also explain the reluctance of many adults – who could neither read nor write – to engage in a Sunday school where their academic deficiencies might be made public. Gordon Reeves observed, “In the Sunday school it is, that many receive the only education they ever get.”¹⁷

State Convention Promoted Sunday School

Within six years after the Florida Baptist State Convention had been organized in 1854, there was a growing interest in the extent of the Sunday school ministry. Rev. G. W. Call, of the Fernandina Baptist Church, was chairman of the State Convention's Sunday School Committee, during the 1860 annual meeting held at Monticello. In Brother Call's committee report he suggested, "that the Secretary of this Convention be instructed to address a circular letter to each church within the bounds of the Convention . . .

requesting . . . accurate statistics of the number of children between six and sixteen years old who usually attend Sunday school," as well as the

number of teachers. The report went on to suggest that every church, "should be a Sunday school house for the neighborhood."¹⁸

**every church, "should
be a Sunday school
house for the
neighborhood"**

Those reports were slow coming due to the Civil War

which suspended the State Convention's annual meetings.

Additionally, the annual meeting *Minutes* for the years 1866 – 1869 are unavailable. However, Reeves explained that the War, "disrupted the work of the schools and for a while they were practically non-existent. By 1864 only three schools were reported in the West Florida Association and these met at irregular intervals."¹⁹

Even after the Civil War, the securing of statistical reports was next to impossible. "In the Alachua Association in 1873 the lack of Sunday school reports caused much consternation." Resolutions were passed asking that the churches give complete Sunday school statistics. This did no good, for in 1875, the Committee on Sunday Schools and Missions was unable to make any definite reports "from the materials contained in the letters." The difficulties of data collection, "were remedied in 1884 by the adoption of a statewide uniform associational letter blank with the organization of the State Board of Missions of the Florida Baptist State Convention."²⁰ [The State Board was organized in 1880.] The first state report on Sunday schools was in 1884, and while this report gave the number of teachers, and officers and pupils, it still did not identify the schools by church name.²¹

Towards the end of the 1860s, momentum was growing for more and better Sunday schools in Florida. A report from George S. Anderson, chairman, of the Committee on Sabbath Schools for the Florida Baptist Association, reported in October, 1867, the existence of five schools with nine teachers and fifty-six scholars. The numerical report was followed by some strong admonitions and positive suggestions. "This apathy in the Sunday school work which is second only in importance to the preached Word, is the result of indifference and neglect on the part of both ministers and members."²²

As George Anderson's report may have suggested, there was some resistance toward the Sunday school movement among Florida churches. John Rosser wrote, "there seems to have been no controversy in the convention as to the wisdom of having Sunday schools. That battle had been fought and won on earlier fields."²³ And although there may not have been any problem with Sunday schools at the State Convention level, Earl Joiner explained, "at the beginning of Florida Baptist Convention life, Sunday schools were very few and some opposition to them still existed."²⁴ Baptist Historian Jack Dalton went further by noting such opposition characterized such schools as being the "devil's workshop."²⁵

Church Member Training Resources

Libraries in the churches' Sunday schools were a key element in the learning environment. An early designated officer in the Sunday school organization was the librarian, which continued to exist into the first quarter of the twentieth century. Southern Baptist Sunday school leader B. W. Spilman wrote the duties of the librarian in the *Convention*

Libraries in the churches' Sunday schools were a key element in the learning environment.

Normal Manual for Sunday-School Workers in 1909. A good Sunday school would have many books. The American Baptist Publication Society was the primary source of these books. As an example, The Primary Class Library No. 1 consisted of fifty volumes. The

Primary Class Library No. 2 contained another fifty volumes. The Society's catalogue advertised, "We ship them in a wooden case ready for use. This case is Free."²⁶

These resources were in addition to the pupils' Sunday school books, teacher training materials, Sunday school record systems, weekly envelopes, certificates, pins, felt pennants, Bibles and every other conceivable supply for the Sunday school. With all this, the American Baptist Publication Society had a built-in market for their "missionary" colportage workers in Florida. The missionaries carried samples, giveaways and even some free materials for the poorest congregations to support their Sunday school work.

The Tampa Baptist Church Sunday School in existence by 1868 was "the largest in the town, but the church was unable to secure the needed supplies; and an appeal was made for outside aid."²⁷ Other churches' Sunday schools were better off. "In 1879, the Lake City Church was the best equipped in Florida, in that it had a new organ, carpets on the floor, and a plank pavement" to the church.²⁸

Florida Baptists Aided by American Baptist Resources

While the State Convention's Sunday School Committee did not have complete reports from their "circular letter," the Convention meeting held at Jacksonville in November, 1870 received reports from the Florida Association of "eight Sunday schools, eight superintendents, thirty-one teachers and two hundred seventy-five pupils."²⁹ The Santa Fee River Association reported "thirty-nine churches with fifteen schools, fifty-three teachers, and four hundred and nine pupils."³⁰ Additionally, while not identifying the churches, 23 other Sunday schools were reported in 1870.

By 1870 Sunday schools were on their way, but not yet in the main stream of interest. Sunday school promotion had received its strongest support up to this time from American Baptist Home Mission Society missionaries and those of the American Baptist Publication Society. The first had been Rev. G. G. Tripp who had organized the Sunday school at Key West in 1844.

"Florida Baptists had benefited from the Society's help before the war, and they were now too desperate to refuse assistance."³¹ P. P. Bishop, "a general agent for the American Baptist Home Mission Society was elected secretary of the Convention in 1869, and as president in 1870 and 1871."³² Additionally, the State Convention's executive board "accepted an arrangement in which the nominated missionaries would be paid by the American

Baptist Home Missionary Society.”³³ By 1872 the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board was on the scene and was cautious in how to go about working with both the Missionary Society and the State Convention.

The first apparent shift in cooperation came when help was promised by the Southern Baptist’s Home Mission Board and the Florida Convention authorized the employment of a state evangelist. Rev. Kinsey Chambers was commissioned beginning July 1, 1873.³⁴ A subsequent report noted, “He traveled widely, preaching, exhorting, making Sunday school addresses.”³⁵ Chambers served through 1876. Chambers was the first person employed directly by the State Convention to develop and contribute to Sunday school work, although his primary assignment was that of evangelist and itinerant preacher. When Chambers resigned there was no immediate replacement. Four years later, during the 1880 State Convention meeting at Madison, the messengers voted to appoint two statewide missionaries, Rev. N. A. Bailey of Micanopy, and Dr. A. H. Robinson, of Lake Como.³⁶ Although assigned as itinerant preachers, they also started Sunday schools in the churches.

Attempts to organize a Florida Sunday School Board to give direction to the Sunday school movement in Florida churches were considered during the annual State Convention meetings held in 1881 at Ocala and again 1882 at Lake City.³⁷ In 1881 a motion was made to establish a Sunday School Board, “whose duty should be to foster and strengthen interest in this agency.”³⁸ Nine men were appointed to serve on the Board.³⁹

In addition to the lack of an overarching organization to promote Sunday school development, there was no one person responsible for promotion or coordination of the work. During the 1882 State Convention messengers proposed that the State Board of Missions consider whether or not, “it be the purpose of this convention to take hold of the Sunday school work as one of its interests” which may include a Sunday School Board and missionary assigned to promote Sunday school.”⁴⁰

**Rev. George W.
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assigned to Sunday
school promotion**

By the December 1884 State Convention in Orlando, the request for a Sunday school missionary had been accomplished. Rev. George W. Hall from Eliam Baptist Church was appointed as the first statewide worker assigned to Sunday school promotion.⁴¹ Missionary Hall wrote a column “for the *Florida Baptist Witness*, under the pen name ‘Uncle Hall’, to give spiritual advice, personal encouragement, and promotional help to all his spiritual nieces and nephews.”⁴² [See story on G. W. Hall in this issue of the *Journal*.]

Sunday Schools’ Developing Years

As previously noted, between 1880 and 1884, Florida got their act together in Sunday school work. Up until this time Sunday school promotion and development had been the responsibility of the few existing Baptist associations. Now the State Convention was serious by the appointment of a State Board of Missions to provide oversight to the statewide missionary activities and the employment of G. W. Hall. This subsequently resulted in a consistent planned direction by the state, a choice in Sunday school materials, the conducting of associational Sunday school conventions, a gradual transition in the utilized resources and leadership to Southern Baptist agencies and personnel from the northern American Baptists. By 1900, Sunday schools in Florida

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organized; we have
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we have never
taught.”**

had grown to 10,064 teachers and officers in the 276 reported Sunday schools from the 1,010 teachers, officers and pupils reported in 1884.⁴³

Awareness of the link between Sunday school and evangelism was a focus of the Sunday school report at the November 1898

State Convention meeting held in Madison. It was noted that “nearly half of the [spiritual] conversions reported during the past year to the State Board of Missions have been, at the time of conversion, pupils in the Sunday school.”⁴⁴

Teaching and Training are Joined

Prior to 1900 the Southern Baptist Convention had “never emphasized the teaching ministry.” A leader said at the time, “We have organized; we have evangelized; we have preached, but we have never taught.” The writer went on to explain: “It was in 1900

that Dr. J. B. Gambrel, the president of the Convention declared, "The time has come for us to further the teaching ministry. I believe the most significant of all modern movements is the work of teacher training." The Southern Baptist Convention adopted the slogan, "A certificate for every teacher: and began to develop resources for teachers."⁴⁵

Florida Baptist leaders realized that standards for Sunday school were needed. As early as 1869, the Santa Fee River Association had been conducting Sunday school training conventions. Finally, at the 1904 State Convention in Kissimmee, a messenger observed, "nothing is plainer to one who is awake than that our Sunday schools must have more competent teachers." A resolution was then passed "recommending that an appointed committee arrange for a series of Bible School Institutes to be held at various central points throughout the state, the program to be prepared by conference with Dr. B. W. Spilman."⁴⁶ The State Convention-sponsored regional training event began soon thereafter. This effort was enhanced when the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board committed to coordinate its training resources through the Florida Baptist State Board of Missions and the increased utilization of Sunday School Board-prepared literature by Florida Baptist churches.⁴⁷

The New Century Yields Statewide Leader

One of the results of the first state Sunday School Convention in 1903 was recognition of the need for a full-time secretary [director] to guide the work of Sunday schools in Florida. This awareness needed time to develop and would not become a reality for three more years. During its January 11, 1906, meeting the State Board of Missions received a communication from the Baptist Sunday School Board's B. W. Spilman who suggested "that more aggressive work be undertaken for the Sunday schools and the Baptist Young People's Union in Florida, and that this work be placed under one management." However, the State Board, already faced with the demands for funding needed for evangelism, missions, benevolence, and education, did not feel justified in adding Sunday school promotion to its expenses.⁴⁸ But the idea did not die; it just had to bide its time.

In February, 1909, the State Board acting on a recommendation from one of its committees, agreed to employ Louis Entzminger, pastor at Kathleen, Florida, to direct the two program ministries of

Sunday school and the Baptist Young People's Union. The S.B.C. Sunday School Board initially contributed \$200.00 to his salary."⁴⁹ Unfortunately, the joint funding effort created tensions between Nashville and Florida as leaders in each entity had their own ideas as to how best to conduct the work being done by Entzminger. Consequently, by July of that same year, the State Board assumed full responsibility for the ministry program and its leader.

Entzminger designated Tampa as his headquarters office, inasmuch as his home was near his former pastorate. During his first year Entzminger surveyed what needed to be done in assisting churches and their leadership. "Then he was able to put his plans into operation. He made a canvass of villages and towns, graded their schools, and organized thirty-seven classes in teacher training."⁵⁰ From this time on, Florida Baptists made Sunday school leadership training a primary focus. During Entzminger's first year of leadership, 28 new Sunday schools were organized.

Employment of a Sunday school secretary [director] was the right direction for Florida's Sunday school work. Although, Jack Dalton noted the transitory nature of Entzminger's commitment to Florida. "Just as the new Secretary became a valuable asset to the work, the Kentucky Baptist Convention induced him to become its Sunday School Secretary and he moved to Kentucky on January 1, 1911."⁵¹ Enlisting and retaining a Florida secretary was a challenge. In the eight years between 1909 and 1916 three different persons led this work.

The Enlistment of George Hyman

Upon recommendation of Dr. Stuart B. Rogers in his report at the January, 1911 State Convention at DeLand, the Sunday School Committee of five selected George Hyman to succeed Entzminger. Hyman began his work on May 1 of that year. Hyman had served as a pastor at Chipley and Marianna. "His work in the Sunday school and B.Y.P.U. was notable; therefore, the committee felt he was well qualified."⁵² Making Jasper, Florida, his office headquarters, he "gave his full attention to promoting this phase of the Baptist program."⁵³ Within two and a half years, Hyman resigned the work (in October 1913), to become pastor of First Baptist Church, Sanford, Florida.

The expected rapid expansion of the Sunday school and B.Y.P.U. ministries apparently failed to materialize. Now as the Corresponding Secretary of the State Board of Missions, S. B. Rogers in 1912 reported to the State Convention, “On this department of your work, Florida presents some conditions peculiar to herself, which make progress exceeding slow.” He went on to observe, “It is certainly with a degree of disappointment that we have to report such a small number of our leaders taking any interest in this work at all.”⁵⁴

To his credit, George Hyman left as his legacy the Florida Baptist Assembly concept. The statewide Assembly brought together Sunday school workers for a weeklong time of training and inspiration. This was the beginning of what became an expanded training emphasis for church leaders in a variety of church

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program ministries. Florida Baptist historians have differed in the actual start date for this annual training conclave. Dalton notes that the first Assembly was held at Stetson University in 1912.⁵⁵ In later

published works, both John Rosser and Earl Joiner gave the date and place as Columbia College in July, 1913.⁵⁶ S. B. Rogers later observed, “Our Sunday school work under the direction of Brother George Hyman, has grown in efficiency and power surpassing all former progress.”⁵⁷ Efforts to find a successor to Hyman were unsuccessful during the ensuing nine months.

However, even without a program Secretary, “the number of Sunday schools increased to 469 from 352 and enrollment increased to 35,058 from 24,553” between 1913-1915.⁵⁸ [See Appendix on page 150 for summary of Sunday school enrollment from 1882-2015.]

Finally, in 1914, the State Board employed T. F. Herndon as a combination Sunday school and enlistment man to promote efficiency along with Sunday school.”⁵⁹ Earl Joiner in his history on Florida Baptists wrote, “the efficiency work drew criticism, but in view of the continued progress of Sunday school work which followed his employment, one must conclude that he did not impede the work of the Sunday school but helped it.”⁶⁰

The story of Florida Baptists' Sunday school ministry continues in Part 2, which follows in this issue of the *Journal*. The writer, L. David Cunningham, served from 1984 through 2001 as director, Sunday School Department, Florida Baptist Convention.

ENDNOTES:

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is an abbreviated and edited rendition of L. David Cunningham's *A History of Florida Baptists' Sunday Schools: Facts, Stories, Legends and Dreams*, published in 2005 by Xulon Press.

- ¹ Bill L. Taylor, "21 Truths, Traditions and Trends" (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1996), 28.
- ² Jack P. Dalton, "A History of Florida Baptists" (Unpublished doctor of philosophy dissertation for The University of Florida: February, 1952), 359.
- ³ John L. Rosser, *A History of Florida Baptists*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1949), 69.
- ⁴ Edward Earl Joiner, *A History of Florida Baptists*, (Jacksonville, FL: Convention Press, 1972), p.27.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 26-27.
- ⁶ Gordon Crawford Reeves, "A History of Florida Baptists," (Unpublished master thesis, Stetson University, Deland, FL: June 1983), 186-187.
- ⁷ Joiner, 27.
- ⁸ Donald S. Hepburn, "Year 2004 Prayer Calendar: Celebrating Heritage and Hope," (Jacksonville, FL: Florida Baptist Convention, 2004), 21.
- ⁹ Joiner, 27.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.
- ¹¹ Reeves, 187.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 187-188.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 189.
- ¹⁸ Rosser, 122.
- ¹⁹ Reeves, 188-189.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 191-192.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 167.
- ²² Florida Baptist Association, *Minutes*, October, 1867, Appendix.
- ²³ Rosser, 121.
- ²⁴ Joiner, 68.
- ²⁵ Dalton, 360; citing an article in the *Florida Baptist Witness*, May 7, 1902.
- ²⁶ "Church and Sunday School Builder 1917 and 1918: American Baptist Publication Society Catalogue," (Philadelphia, PA.), 92.

- ²⁷ Dalton, 360.
²⁸ *Ibid.*
²⁹ Rosser, 123.
³⁰ *Ibid.*
³¹ Joiner, 54.
³² *Ibid.*
³³ *Ibid.*
³⁴ Rosser, 52.
³⁵ *Ibid.*
³⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.
³⁷ Reeves, 194.
³⁸ Rosser, 125.
³⁹ *Ibid.*
⁴⁰ State Board of Missions, *Minutes*, December 11-18, 1884, 15.
⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25.
⁴² *Florida Baptist Witness*, various early volumes.
⁴³ Rosser, 130.
⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 128
⁴⁵ C. B. Easey, *Principles of Teaching for Christian Teachers*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, Fifth Edition, n.d.), 30-31.
⁴⁶ Rosser, 129.
⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.
⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.
⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.
⁵¹ Dalton, 361.
⁵² *Ibid.*, 362.
⁵³ *Ibid.*
⁵⁴ *Ibid.*
⁵⁵ *Ibid.*
⁵⁶ Rosser, 132; Joiner, 154.
⁵⁷ Rosser, 133.
⁵⁸ Joiner, 109.
⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Florida Baptists' Sunday School Ministry: Part 2 (1916 – 2015)

*by L. David Cunningham
Freelance writer
Jacksonville, Florida*



The 30-year Leadership of Willian (1916 – 1946)

In the preceding article, designated as Part 1, the last Sunday school leader serving the Florida Baptist Convention prior to his resignation was T. F. Herndon. Finding a qualified or interested person to lead the Convention's Sunday school ministry languished. After two years State Board of Missions' Corresponding Secretary Stuart B. Rogers presented during the January 20, 1916 State Convention meeting, W. W. Willian to lead the department. At the time Willian was pastor at Tavares Baptist Church.

Willian proved to be a good choice, giving strong leadership and stability to the work for the next 30 years, a tenure that was not equaled in the state's Sunday school work to this day. Believing the need to better understand the nature and role of the Sunday school ministry, Willian did not immediately begin his work. Rather, as a condition of his employment, Willian requested to spend a month learning his assignment from Harry L. Strickland, the Alabama Baptist Convention's Sunday School Secretary [director]. Willian then began his Florida service in April, 1916. At the start of Willian's tenure Florida Baptists had 469 Sunday schools with a recorded enrollment of 38,566.¹

Baptist Historian Jack Dalton described Willian, a North Carolina native, as "small in stature, big in heart." He was a tireless worker and a friendly soul. He knew the importance of details and never grew discouraged."² His work spanned two World Wars, the Great Depression and the



transformation of America to a world power. Willian developed a routine of spending ten days a month in his office “to care for his correspondence and other administrative details” with the rest of his time spent on the field.³

Florida Baptist Pastor John Rosser observed that Willian visited churches to assess their program, and provided “training schools for all workers.”⁴ He expanded the Sunday school teachers and leadership training programs that included an enhanced Standard of Excellence. Within the first ten years of his work, Willian introduced and promoted

a whole series of new leadership studies to support the local churches' Sunday school program.

“Much of the work of Sunday school in Florida, and throughout the United States can be attributed to a pioneer Sunday school leader by the name of Arthur Flake,” observed Sunday school leader Harry Piland.⁵ Flake produced a host of teacher training resources that were embraced and promoted through Florida Baptist churches by Willian.

In his Sunday school department report to the 1928 State Convention, Willian credited Arthur Flake for the success of Florida's Sunday school growth as a result of using Flake's resources of the

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school growth**

Enlargement Campaigns, the work of the Standard Sunday schools, the *Sunday School Builder* and the teaching of the course for Sunday school administration. Willian noted that 530 Florida Sunday school leaders earned the trained teacher diploma in 1928.⁶

Another strategy implemented was the enlistment of “Approved Workers,” a process of choosing experienced Sunday school leaders who could lead training events in various areas of the state. That strategy multiplied the training personnel of the Convention staff – which at the time was only Willian – was used until the dissolution of the Sunday school department in 2015.

Added Convention Staff

Sunday school work was growing. Soon it became apparent that Willian needed more hands-on board. One solution was the separation of Sunday school and the Baptist Young People's Union (BYPU) programs. “Reverend O. K. Armstrong, pastor at Lake Butler was secured to lead the BYPU training program on March 1, 1920. Armstrong, a native of Missouri and a veteran of the World War I had only

recently returned from France. But he resigned within one year to become a member of the faculty at the University of Florida.”⁷ Willian had to resume leadership of both ministry programs until 1938. To relieve Willian of the growing demand for church training events, in 1924 the Convention employed contract workers, called Sunday School Field Workers, in the persons of Miss Blanche Dittmar and J. P. Edmund. The increased training staff was in response to what S. B. Rogers declared, “The number of Sunday schools has been increased by 50 per cent.”⁸

Finally in 1927 O. K. Radford was selected to serve as a district agent to aid Willian in both Sunday school and BYPU work. Radford faithfully served until the Sunday school and BYPU programs were again separated into two stand-alone departments in 1938. Radford was named as secretary [director] of the BYPU department. E. B. Evans, was employed as a Field Worker in 1927, but only served for a brief time.

The early 1930’s focused on Sunday school teacher and officer training by means of assemblies at DeLand and west Florida. Sunday school training schools, such as the one at Tampa in 1931 enrolled over 450 and one at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville was even larger. Other promotion efforts included: enlargement campaigns; study courses; and Standard Sunday schools. Rosser, in his history of Florida Baptists, reported that about 85 percent of the additions to the churches were coming from those who had first been enrolled in Sunday school.”⁹

Sunday school record keeping was an important part of the schools’ organizational processes. A newly implemented record system provided a barometer on the condition of individuals spiritual health, and of the progress for classes and the Sunday school ministry. The so-called “Six Point Record System” encouraged Sunday school pupils to focus upon their: attendance; being on time; Bible brought; offering; prepared lesson; and preaching attendance.

Transitions in Leadership Occurred

Rev. Tom Collins became associate secretary (director) of the Sunday school department on August 15, 1945. Collins' basic assignment was to work with associations given that level of Baptist organizational life "was the most effective means of reaching every church" with the best Sunday school plans.¹⁰

Following Willian's thirtieth report to the State Convention meeting at Jacksonville in January, 1946, and having reached retirement age, he submitted his resignation effective July 1, 1946. Willian's effective service was borne out by the statistical reports comparing 1915 and 1946. When he began serving there were 35,058 persons enrolled in Florida's 469 Sunday schools. By 1946, the statewide Sunday school enrollment was 143,232, a more than three-fold increase.¹¹

Although Tom Collins had been elected department secretary [director] on July 1, 1946 upon the retirement of Willian, Collins resigned a year later, on August 15, 1947, to become pastor in Carrollton, Alabama. Mrs. Lee MacDonell, an associate in the department, was named acting secretary [director] from August 15, through November 15, 1947, and made the annual Sunday school report to the Convention. Rev. W. Hal Hunter was employed as an associate for associational promotion in June, 1946, but he resigned in May 1947, to become pastor of First Baptist Church, Lake Wales, Florida.

Rev. Glen Bridges who had been elected on July 1, 1947, to follow Hunter as the associate for promotion of association work, was elected secretary [director] of the department later that fall. Unfortunately Bridges resigned July 4th, 1948, to accept an appointment by the SBC Foreign Mission Board as a missionary for South Brazil. Gustave Johnson, who was elected as an associate on June 1, 1948, to promote association work, was then named acting leader until C. F. Barry assumed the duties on February 1, 1949.

Surprisingly, four different persons had held the department secretary [director] position in the span of 30 months during the time churches were experiencing significant growth as a result of all the returning military service personnel following WW II. Sunday schools in Florida increased enrollment by more than 40,000 persons during the department's leadership transition period.

In 1948, January Bible Study was introduced as a Sunday school event. These annual studies of one book or passage of the Bible continued into the 21st century. The first book studied was Ephesians, and Florida Baptist Historian Earl Joiner reported that 75 churches participated in that year requesting 1,579 study course awards.¹²

The Fabulous Fifties

Dr. John Maguire, who had been named executive secretary of the State Board of Missions, recommended that Charles Franklyn Barry, then serving as state Sunday school superintendent in Illinois, be approved to lead Florida's Sunday school work effective February 1, 1949. Mr. Barry had led the Illinois Baptist Sunday school work for exactly five years, since February 1, 1944. J. N. Barnette, Sunday school secretary of the Baptist Sunday School Board, and who annually led training events in Florida, commended the selection of Barry. "He knows how to map out and promote a statewide program. . . a congenial and cooperative fellow worker, and a dynamic leader and promoter in his own department."¹³

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the acceptance of
Sunday school. . .**

A statewide Sunday School Convention held February, 1949, was the first held in many years and presented a golden opportunity for Dr. Maguire to present Barry to the local churches' Sunday school leaders. Within two years, the State Sunday School

Convention became one of Barry's signature events for promoting Sunday school work. These conventions served to unify church, association and state leaders in the acceptance of Sunday school as the lead ministry of the church. January Bible Study took root and grew. Enlargement campaigns provided outside leadership for motivation. A record number of Sunday schools achieved Standard recognition. Sunday school leadership training awards were the highest in the nation, year after year. Sunday school enrollment and attendance increased at record levels. In the eight years, 1946-1954, Sunday school enrollment more than doubled to 298,891 from 143,232.¹⁴ Subsequent growth between the years 1953-1955 were the watershed years for Florida's Sunday schools with enrollment climbing to over 319,533.¹⁵

"Tours" for promoting Sunday school work were big in the 1950's. Department associates who were added to the staff – Clifford J. Smyly, Charles Peterson and Frank Delrose – along with C. F. Barry and J. N. Barnette, took off across the state conducting nightly promotion meetings for Sunday school superintendents and pastors, and calling on various churches as they passed by during the day. To enhance trained local leaders, statewide leadership schools were begun in 1950 to train association Sunday school leaders.¹⁶

National leaders again focused on the Sunday school as a gateway to evangelism. BSSB leader A. V. Washburn wrote, "No two groups of workers in Southern Baptist life have more in common than the departments of Evangelism and Sunday school work. Every emphasis and effort of the one makes use of and adds to the effectiveness of the other."¹⁷ Dr. Gaines Dobbins added, "Where Bible teaching precedes, evangelism has its richest fruitage; and where Bible teaching follows, evangelism has its most permanent results."¹⁸

The impact of Florida's Sunday school growth and expansion continued into the year 1955, as a result of the national enrollment emphasis called a "Million More in '54." The campaign was followed by nationwide revivals held in 1955.

Over 300,000 persons united with Southern Baptist churches during the 1955 Simultaneous Revival Crusades, with some 200,000 coming for baptism.¹⁹

In Sunday school leadership awards, Florida continued to be the leader. In 1957, the state recorded 56,540 awards, followed by 58,028 awards in 1958. The five leading churches were: Allapattaha, Miami, 1,624; First Baptist, Jacksonville, 1,224; Delaney Street, Orlando, 684; Beulah, Winter Garden, 612; and Fifth Avenue, St. Petersburg, 574. Notably, Florida led the SBC in Sunday school enrollment increase for 1958 and in Standard Sunday schools with 128 schools attaining this recognition. Although Florida enrollment declined in 1957, the state's Sunday school enrollment increased in 1958 which was the largest in the Southern Baptist Convention.²⁰

The Surprising 1960's

Sunday school work entered the 1960's riding high on the crest of the "Fabulous Fifties." The programs, promotions and foundations established in the 1950's were expected to continue, during which Florida's Sunday school enrollment had climbed by 80 percent. Florida led the nation in Sunday school enrollment gain in 1961 with an increase of 13,179, and again in 1962 with a gain of 8,290. Surprisingly by the mid-1960's, growth and expansion virtually stopped.

Florida led the nation in Sunday school enrollment

Despite the use of the same quality of training and promotion, some church Sunday schools began losing enrollment. In the ten years, 1960-1970, Sunday school enrollment in the state made a net increase of only 8,879 people.²¹

Florida continued a pattern of proven Sunday school promotion in the years 1960-65, as churches undertook community outreach. Approximately 505 churches were involved in religious censuses and a total of 47,699 prospects

were located of which 23,678 were spiritually lost persons.²² A number of references were recorded in Joiner's *History of Florida Baptists*, regarding the contribution of Sunday school to baptisms. If nothing else, the frequent involvement of Sunday school in taking a religious census and doing people searches to locate and identify persons by name, that were spiritually lost, was a major proven contribution to evangelism. Two department associates serving during this period were Paul W. Glore (1961-1965) and Herbert W. McGlamery (1965-1980).

Change was occurring across the country that affected interest in Sunday school. Among the contributing changes were a strong upsurge in adult education, the impact of television, race issues, and other social problems that created major life-style changes for Americans. Many youth and adults threw off the values and traditions of their parents in "frustration with the establishment," in the early sixties, so they joined the "hippies" or other movements as a way of protest, or otherwise to withdraw from the system."²³ While changes in curriculum were undoubtedly needed, the over emphasis on curriculum, abandonment of an established educational system, (both internal and external), a change in focus from people to programs and materials, and a more complicated society resulted in a major shift away from Sunday school in Florida and throughout the U.S.A. from the mid-sixties onward. Despite all the efforts by Florida's Sunday school leaders, in 1966 Florida churches suffered their first loss in Sunday school enrollment since the Depression; a decline that continued between 1968-71.²⁴

In this context of events, Franklyn Barry retired from his post as superintendent for Florida's Sunday schools on February 5, 1970, his 68th birthday. His 21 years of service provided stable, consistent effective leadership.

Texan James Frost Called to Lead Florida

Called the "Texas hurricane," Rev. James Frost the newly designated Sunday school department director, rode into

Florida on the winds of change with the 1970's, officially beginning his work on March 1, 1970. Frost came to Florida from the position of Sunday school secretary in Texas where he had served since 1968.

In the fall of 1970, the Baptist Sunday School Board initiated a seismic change in the Sunday school organization, age grouping and curriculum. Against that backdrop Frost brought new ideas for Florida's Sunday school ministry that included program promotion and staff changes. By November, when the new church program structure was in place, he brought Mike Collins on to oversee youth and VBS ministries. In June, 1971 he added Murray McCullough to lead in outreach/enlargement and young adult Sunday school work.

A new process was implemented to provide experienced, trained Sunday school leaders for all age groups. For this, Frost created the state Sunday school "Special Workers" Corps. He hand-picked a group of Sunday school leaders from across the state. Eventually, the Special Worker force numbered more than 250 volunteers.

Reaching into communities through the bus ministry had become a trend for Sunday schools by 1972. Soon churches throughout Florida had purchased busses and were bringing in hundreds, mostly children, to Sunday school. To network these churches, and to teach the "how to's" of bus ministry, the Sunday school department began conducting Bus Outreach Ministry Clinics. Additionally, Backyard Bible Clubs were begun in 1973 using specialized materials featuring a simple approach to teaching children. These clubs were used as an outreach to children in Sunday school and the materials were often used for mission VBS.

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These promotion and training efforts yielded dividends. Most importantly, the downward slide in Sunday school enrollment finally stopped, and Florida's Sunday schools began to recover in 1972 under Frost's strong leadership. However, it took a full decade between 1965 until 1975, before Florida's Sunday schools' enrollment set new records.

Continuing Staff Changes

Rev. Mike Collins, who had joined the Sunday school staff in 1970, resigned in 1973 to lead the Sunday school program of Ohio Baptists. Rev. Murray McCullough, who had joined the Sunday school staff in 1971, was transferred to the Convention's Cooperative Missions Department in December, 1973. Just as two staff members left in December, two new leaders subsequently were employed June 1, 1974. Willie Beaty, who was serving as minister of education for the First Baptist Church, Palatka, was employed as an associate assigned to youth and VBS training. Frost chose a friend and former associate in Texas, Rev. Cecil W. Roenfeldt to assume a revised assignment as associate for enlargement, outreach and bus ministry. Roenfeldt had served as minister of education at the Sagamore Hills Baptist Church, Fort Worth. In time, other staff added included Frank Delrose, John McInnis, and Ron Palmer.

Having reached the mandatory retirement age of 65, James Frost stepped down as Sunday school director in June, 1983. During his 13 years at the helm, Florida's Sunday school enrollment had gained 76,717 persons to reach 483,367.²⁵ The programs and special emphases Frost initiated included: Great Day, (high attendance), Special Workers Institute, Mini-Conferences, Sunday school Conferences at Blue Springs Baptist Assembly, Church Growth Institutes, Outreach Visitation Conferences, Bus Outreach Conferences, New Sunday school and new unit recognitions, the Special Education Retreat, ACTION, and Growth Spiral, Fastest Growing Sunday school recognitions, Fall Single Adult Retreats and the VBS student workers program.

Emphasis Upon Growth Continued

The State Board of Missions voted in 1984 to employ L. David Cunningham, minister of education at First Baptist Church, Orlando, since January of 1973 as state Sunday school director. While Frost had been a high-profile leader focusing his work on pastors, Cunningham's primary focus was to target church Sunday school directors and ministers of education. Florida's position as the preeminent leader in Sunday school study course awards continued. Cunningham also believed strongly in Sunday school growth and continued the evangelistic emphasis of reaching people through the Sunday school.

A new effort to lead churches to begin additional Sunday schools was a priority assignment given to newly employed Dr. John Clough, the department's adult specialist. Rev. Kenneth Westbrook joined the Sunday school department staff in December, 1985, as an associate director for preschool and children's ministry, child care and kindergarten work.

The year 1986 began with the "Challenge 10/90" strategy to increase national Sunday school enrollment to 10 million by the end of September 1990. In Florida, four separate events in 1986 helped Sunday schools grow, but the 3,319-enrollment increase fell far short of the 28,086 goal. These supporting events included simultaneous revivals; outreach Bible study; the return of a state Sunday School Convention and advent of the StarTeam corps to assist churches in beginning new Sunday schools. Despite these initiatives, Florida's Sunday schools' enrollment continued to increase at a slower rate, and by 1988 the enrollment increase of 5,441 was enough to lead the SBC.²⁶

On March 6, 1988, Dr. John Clough resigned his position to become pastor of the First Baptist Church, Oviedo. Rev. John Boone, pastor of Lakeview Baptist Church, Tallahassee, was selected to take his place as adult specialist and began his work on October 1, 1988.

Sunday School Briefly Renamed Bible Teaching-Reaching

The department name was changed in 1994 from Sunday school department to Bible Teaching-Reaching department, following the lead of the Baptist Sunday School Board, and in an attempt to update Sunday schools' image with Florida churches.²⁷ Many of the larger churches had dropped the name Sunday school and were using titles like Bible study, Sunday Bible study, or

Fellowship Bible Classes. "Innovative" church starts were using all kinds of names for their Bible studies.

"Innovative" church starts were using all kinds of names for their Bible studies.

Florida's international culture was another target for the name change. Many persons coming from other countries viewed Sunday school as an American culture. However, the change proved to be controversial from the start. Many church leaders and pastors objected to the omission of the name Sunday school, and voiced their displeasure. Subsequently, the department's name was changed back to Sunday school in September 1998.²⁸

In September, 1995, Dr. Stephen (Spike) Hogan was employed to promote growth and general officers' tasks formerly promoted by Roenfeldt. Hogan came from the pastorate of Wright Baptist Church, Fort Walton Beach, where he had led the church in Sunday school and church growth through personal and church evangelism.

The year 1997 brought a renewed interest in Sunday school. Research featured in books written by Southern Baptist leaders Dr. Thom Rainer, Ken Hemphill, and Rick Warren stimulated renewed interest in the duality of Bible teaching through Sunday school and its evangelism potential.²⁹ The year 1997 was good for Sunday school growth in Florida as enrollment gained 10,396. Average attendance also climbed by 7,177 to a record 268,580 persons attending weekly.³⁰

Dr. David Rice joined the department staff in 1998, replacing Spike Hogan, who had been recruited to lead the Convention's Pastoral Ministries department. Rice subsequently worked with Bobby Welch, pastor at Daytona Beach and originator of F.A.I.T.H., a Sunday school evangelism strategy that provided a strong base in Florida for the national movement. F.A.I.T.H. is an acrostic with "F"-representing forgiveness; "A"-available; "I"-Impossible; "T"-Turn; and "H"-Heaven. Each of the letters were accompanied with a structured narrative and selected Scriptures for a formal presentation.

"Sunday School for a New Century," resources were guidebooks for the work in 1999. The general book was much like the 1998 resource, and continued the transition to the new century. B.S.S.B. leader Bill Taylor redefined the definition of Sunday school and legitimized the concept of short-term Bible study groups.³¹ Much of 1999 was given to the F.A.I.T.H. strategy, enlisting churches to participate and giving leadership in the clinics and awareness meetings. "Target 2000 Growth Campaigns," Eaglenet, Great Day and the encouragement of churches to provide off-site Bible studies were additional emphases during the year.

Dr. David Rice resigned his position on May 10, 1999 and returned to the local church pastorate. Rev. Jeff Hessinger joined the department staff on December 1, 1999 having previously served as pastor for evangelism at First Baptist Church, Temple Terrace.

Training Non-Anglo Church Leaders

In an effort to address the needs of African-American and language congregations that the Convention was aggressively starting, the State Board of Missions authorized the creation of several new staff positions in the 1990s. While not a part of the existing Sunday school program department or other church program ministries, the goal was to provide complementary and specialized Sunday school training resources to non-Anglo and non-English speaking church

leaders. These supporting specialty departments included African-American church development and an ethnic education office that evolved into a language church development department.

Florida's Sunday Schools Enter the 21st Century

New paradigms for Sunday school by the beginning of the year 2000 were being called for from local churches, state conventions, and even the Baptist Sunday School Board's leadership. The historic Baptist Sunday School Board, founded for the purpose of providing curriculum materials and promoting Sunday school work changed its name to LifeWay Christian Resources of the S.B.C.

Sunday school enrollment in the state had reached 596,482 by September 2000. Unfortunately, statewide enrollment slipped in 2001 to 595,641, a loss of 841 from the 2000 enrollment.³²

State director L. David Cunningham concluded his service and retired on December 31, 2001. Rev. John Boone who had been serving as associate director from October 1, 1988 became the state's next Sunday school director beginning the first day of 2002. David Moore was employed to serve in the southeast Florida area, and to give leadership to adult ministries. He later was assigned to preschool/children ministries. Russ Hughes was reassigned to the adult age group work. Jeff Hessinger was named director of the Convention's Personal Evangelism Department in 2003. He was replaced by Rev. Rick Wheeler, who was serving as associate pastor/minister of education, in the Gainesville area, to lead the emphases of outreach, evangelism and Sunday school growth. When Russ Hughes took a medical disability leave, Rev. Lewis Miller joined the department with primary responsibilities to assist churches and associations in the northeast Florida region.

Changing Sunday School Ministry, 2005-2015

Florida Baptist Convention Sunday schools during the decade 2005-2015 might best be characterized by one word: Change. This time period witnessed a change in gathering times and places, nomenclature, (Sunday school vs Small Groups), curriculum, teaching styles, use of electronic media in both leadership

training and teaching, evangelistic programs, and change in both national and Florida convention staff. The following are highlights of those changes.

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Sunday School to Small Group

The shift from Sunday school to “Small Group” terminology in Florida Baptist Sunday schools appears to have begun about 2005 with the Convention’s first Small Group conference registering 183 church leaders, representing 61 churches. Both Florida and national Sunday school leaders realized the shift to Small Groups from Sunday school had both its good and cautious elements. But promoting training events under the banner of Sunday school became difficult as churches were caught up in the new Small Group movement. Jorge Molina, pastor of Christ Fellowship in Miami said Small Groups “are formed on community – where someone lives - and season of life, and based upon three pillars: evangelism, fellowship, and Bible study.”³³ The two emphases provide a stark contrast: Sunday school had been an organized, structured, age-appropriate study of the Scriptures in an environment facilitating evangelism, ministry, and social development, leading to members becoming fully devoted followers of Christ. Conversely, Small Groups are often formed without a long-range strategy or organizational design, leaving preschool, children and youth without a comprehensive path.

As a result of non-reporting by some churches and the confusion on how to count/report small group enrollment, Sunday schools in Florida, as elsewhere, had begun to lose members by the turn of the twenty-first century. From a reported enrollment of 579,863 in 2005, enrollment declined to 449,146 in 2014, for a loss of 130,717. Sunday school average attendance also reported a decline from 274,874 in 2005 to 194,955 in 2015 for a weekly average loss of 79,919.³⁴ [See Appendix on page 150 for summary of Sunday school enrollment from 1882-2015.]

Bible Study Curriculum

A majority of Florida Baptist churches continued to use Bible study materials produced by Lifeway Christian Resources, inasmuch as Lifeway moved to provide a broad smorgasbord of curricula for today's churches. Some Florida Baptist churches chose to use Sunday school Bible study curriculum customized just for them by Lifeway. A third option was to choose from internet resources representing 1,200 independent and searchable studies on 400 topics from all 66 books of the Bible. In choosing customized Bible studies, churches had the option to use their own logo, terminology and study templates.³⁵

Leadership Training

Leadership training for Florida's Baptist churches was conducted in a number of ways prior to 2015. Up until then, a team of five staff members (a director and four associates) in the Sunday school department divided the state into four regions to provide direct assistance, at any time, to Florida Baptist churches. State wide and area wide Sunday school leadership training was provided through conferences and conventions on an annual basis in the different regions. Parallel training events for African-American and non-English speaking church leadership also were provided by separate departments, as previously noted.

Sunday School Staff Reductions

Training and promotion for Florida's almost 600,000 Sunday school enrollees from 2005 until 2009 was reduced as staff positions began to be reduced. "As a result of declining Cooperative Program income between 2008 and 2011, over 25 percent of the total convention staff was reduced through positions elimination, lay-offs and early retirements" beginning in September 2011.³⁶ However during this decade a variety of persons served in the Sunday school department including: director, John Boone; and associates: John G. McInnis [retired in 2010]; David Moore [resigned 2014]; W. Lewis Miller [who in 2008 was re-assigned to the Convention's Leadership and Life department]; Richard Wheeler, [who was promoted to lead the Convention's Leadership Development office in 2006]; and Douglas A. Watkins [who was promoted to lead the Convention's Theological Education and Distance Learning].

Another Name Change and Re-organization

In 2012, the Sunday school department's name and functions were again changed. The new name became, Sunday School, Groups and Discipling Ministries Team. In downsizing the convention staff, the Discipleship Training Department was dissolved, with their assignments shifted to the Sunday school department. The name "Groups" was added to reflect the "Small Groups" vernacular being used in place of Sunday school in many churches. During 2012-2014 the Sunday School, Groups and Discipling Ministries team consisted of: Director John Boone, and associates, David Moore and Anthony Hoffman.

John Boone, retired from the Convention staff in 2015. Anthony Hoffman who had been employed in 2011, continued to serve as the single staff member in the department until the Convention reorganized at the end of 2015, dissolved the department, and assigned the tasks to newly established regional catalysts.

The Florida Baptist Convention has been without a dedicated Sunday school leader since the end of 2015 when the Sunday school department was dissolved. That dissolution was a part of a major re-organization, staff reductions and a new paradigm of how the Convention delivers program services to local churches and associations. This is the first time in 130 years since the election of G. W. Hall, the first Sunday school missionary in 1884, the state has been without a specific Sunday school leader.

This concludes the two-part abbreviated story of Florida Baptists' Sunday school ministry. The writer, L. David Cunningham, served from 1984 through 2001 as director, Sunday School department, Florida Baptist Convention.

ENDNOTES:

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is an abbreviated and edited rendition of L. David Cunningham's *A History of Florida Baptists' Sunday Schools: Facts, Stories, Legends and Dreams*, published in 2005 by Xulon Press.

¹ "Uniform Church Letters Statistical Summary," Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1916.

² Jack P. Dalton, "A History of Florida Baptists" (Unpublished doctor of philosophy dissertation for The University of Florida: February, 1952), 363.

³ *Ibid.*, 364.

⁴ John L. Rosser, *A History of Florida Baptists*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1949), 134.

⁵ Harry M. Piland, *Basic Sunday School Work*, (Nashville, TN: Convention Press, 1980), 21.

⁶ Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1928, 64.

⁷ Dalton, 364.

⁸ Rosser, 136-137.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹¹ "Uniform Church Letters Statistical Summary," Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1946.

¹² Edward Earl Joiner, *A History of Florida Baptists*, (Jacksonville, FL: Convention Press, 1972), 183.

¹³ *Florida Baptist Witness*, January 27, 1949, 6.

¹⁴ "Uniform Church Letters Statistical Summary," Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1954.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1955.

¹⁶ *Florida Baptist Witness*, August 21, 1952, 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, April 16, 1953, 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, June, 23, 1955, 14.

²⁰ “Uniform Church Letters Statistical Summary,” Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1957 and 1958.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 1960 through 1970.

²² Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1964, 58.

²³ See Howard P. Colson and Raymond M. Rigdon, *Understanding Your Church’s Curriculum*, Revised Edition, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1981), 27-29.

²⁴ Joiner, 250.

²⁵ “Uniform Church Letters Statistical Summary,” Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1970 and 1983.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1988.

²⁷ State Board of Missions report, Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1994.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1998.

²⁹ As an example of these conclusions, see Ken Hemphill, *Revitalizing the Sunday School Dinosaur*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1996).

³⁰ “All Church Profile Statistical Summary,” Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 1997. [This statistical information was formerly collected from churches as the Uniform Church Letter until the collection form was re-defined.]

³¹ Bill L. Taylor and Louis B. Hanks, *Sunday School for a New Century*, (Nashville, TN: Lifeway Press, 1999), 74-76.

³² “All Church Profile Statistical Summary,” Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 2000 and 2001.

³³ Keila Diaz and Nicole Kalil, “Small Groups Increasing in Popularity,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, November 5-15, 2015, 6.

³⁴ “All Church Profile Statistical Summary,” Florida Baptist Convention, *Annual*, 2005 and 2015.

³⁵ Baptist Press, “Miami Pastor Sees Benefits of New Bible Study Tool,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, October, 2015, 6.

³⁶ Don Hepburn, “Convention Staff Reorganization,” *Florida Baptist Witness*, April 26, 2012, 4.

George Washington Hall – a.k.a. “Uncle Hall” – Florida Baptists’ First Sunday School Evangelist to Children

*by Mary T. Hall, J.D.
Adjunct Professor of Political Science
and Military History
St. Mary’s College of Maryland*



In 1863, George Washington Hall, then a young private in the Army of Northern Virginia penned in his wartime diary, “I wish it to be the work of my life to be an instrument in Spreading the glory of God and to bring glory to his kingdom by influencing others to walk the narrow path that leads to eternal life.”¹ Hall, my great-grandfather, made good on his promise. Ordained as a Baptist minister after the war, he spent the remainder of his life in ministry over a wide swath of Florida and Georgia, leading one historian to describe him as the “missionary on horseback.”² He is likely best remembered, however, for his work as the first state-wide Sunday school missionary for the Florida Baptist Convention.

George Washington Hall was born on August 25, 1841, in Talladega County, Alabama. After spending some portion of his childhood in Americus, Georgia, he moved at the age of sixteen to Worth County, Georgia, where he resided with his mother, stepfather, and several half-siblings. As *Christian Index* editor Samuel Boykin noted, Hall’s early years were “passed in toil and obscurity, without any of the privileges of education and study . . . the only relieving brightness to its gloom being the tender teachings and influence of a pious mother.”³



George W. Hall

Religious Conversion as Civil War Prisoner

Shortly after the Civil War broke out, Hall, by then a 19-year-old farmer, enlisted in a local volunteer unit which would later become Company G of the 14th Georgia Infantry Regiment. The regiment served almost the entire war in Virginia, primarily with the Army of Northern Virginia. Hall saw combat in many of the war's bloodiest battles, including

Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. After being captured at Spotsylvania, Virginia, on May 12, 1864, he spent nine months as a prisoner of war at Fort Delaware, Delaware. He was exchanged only a month before the war ended.

Hall maintained a diary in two volumes during most of the war.⁴ Other than a period when he was seriously ill, he wrote almost daily in his diary, documenting life as a private in camp, in combat, and as a prisoner of war. But his most powerful entries tell the story of his religious conversion in early 1863 while he was recovering from smallpox and erysipelas in a soldier’s hospital in Staunton, Virginia. That spiritual conversion was of such power that it molded the remainder of Hall’s life. An entry on Sunday, January 25, 1863 – where he asked the Lord to give him a new heart and help him follow the path to everlasting life – is the first of over a hundred entries in which Hall wrote supplications to God, memorialized

attendance at worship events, or otherwise referenced his Christian faith. After he returned to his regiment, Hall was baptized into the Missionary Baptist Church on April 12, 1863.

**That spiritual
conversion was of
such power that it
molded the remainder
of Hall’s life.**

In February 1864, Hall traveled on a 30-day furlough to Liberty County, Florida, where his family had relocated shortly after the war began. At church services in nearby Wakulla County, Hall met Amanda M. E. Mobley, the girl he would marry in July 1865 when he returned home from the war. They wed at the church where they had met, Mount Elon Baptist Church, near Sopchoppy, Florida.

Fulfilling His Promise to God

Hall wasted little time making good on his promise to spread God’s word. He was already officiating at Mount Elon by April 1866 and was ordained there, at the age of 26, in 1867. As pastor at Mount Elon until late 1872, Hall oversaw the

construction of a new church building in 1870.⁵ Likely inspired by the library of religious books at the soldiers' hospital in Virginia, Hall applied for, and received, a grant from the American Baptist Publication Society in 1868 for books for his congregation.⁶

Hall became active in the Florida Baptist Association, which at that time also included churches in south Georgia. Notwithstanding his inexperience, Hall officiated at the Saturday night preaching at the 1868 association meeting at Grooversville, Georgia.⁷ In addition to his pastoral service at Mount Elon, he served as a correspondent to other associations and preached at other churches in Wakulla and Gadsden counties. Hall wrote in a journal that one of his services at Antioch on December 31, 1871, was so large "that it was necessary to move the seats out of the church and schoolhouse and conduct the services in the open air under the live oaks."⁸

Amanda bore three children (Mary Ida, Robert Erastus (Eric), and Burwell Adoniram Judson) while the family lived in Sopchoppy. They moved to Concord, Florida, in 1872, where they welcomed their fourth child, Willis Washington Hall, in 1874. Minutes from the Florida Baptist Association annual meeting in 1872 showed Hall as pastor of Antioch, Concordia, and Midway churches in Gadsden County. He was the first pastor at Corinth Baptist Church in Liberty County and pastor of Providence Church in Quincy between 1873-1875.

Hall logged his preaching in his journal, using columns to note the book and verse of his sermon

Between August 1872 and June 1876, Hall logged his preaching in his journal, using columns to note the book and verse of his sermon, the location of the service, and the date. This log shows that in addition to preaching at his regularly-assigned churches,

Hall preached at many other churches, at schoolhouses, and at the homes of Baptist families. Hall’s engagement in the Florida Baptist Association likewise swelled after his move to Concord. In 1873, 1874, and 1875, he served as moderator for the association’s annual session, and he sponsored the 1874 and 1875 sessions at Antioch and Providence, respectively.

Ministry Service in Santa Fe River Association

The Halls moved from Gadsden County to Putnam County in 1875. This entailed a transfer to the Santa Fe River Baptist Association, where Hall remained an active minister through at least 1891. Hall built a house in Melrose, where daughter Minnie Viola was born in 1877. He served as pastor at Eliam Baptist Church in Melrose between 1877-1878, but Hall spent much of his time serving outlying churches, including the Levy County Mission, some 80 miles from Melrose.⁹ At various times between 1876 and 1883, Hall served as pastor at Miconopy; at Concord Church in Otter Creek; at Pleasant Grove at Morrison’s Mill; at Warahoota; at Waldo; and at Paran Baptist Church near Palatka.¹⁰

the total number of churches at which Hall served as pastor over the course of his ministry is difficult to calculate

In fact, the total number of churches at which Hall served as pastor over the course of his ministry is difficult to calculate; many of these churches were likely “quarter-Sunday” churches, visited only a few times a month. What is inescapable, however, is

that he kept a grueling pace, usually traveling by horseback or horse and buggy; for example, the missionary report he submitted to the 1876 association meeting showed he spent 165 days of service, traveled 2,269 miles, preached 202 sermons, and visited 265 families.¹¹ Hall’s 1877 report showed that in just over nine months, he traveled 2,126 miles and preached 132 sermons.¹²

By 1881, the extent of Hall's reputation as an evangelical preacher was such that his biography was featured in Samuel Boykin's *History of the Baptist Denomination of Georgia*, the second half of which is a collection of biographies of prominent Baptist ministers compiled for the *Christian Index*. This was a singular recognition for a 39-year-old preacher who never had a single day of divinity school. As Boykin wrote, Hall "is a good preacher, using excellent language, and being remarkably systematic and clear, for one whose educational advantages have been limited. He is a prudent, calm, self-possessed man, whose influence in the family and social circle is good."¹³

According to the Boykin biography, as of 1881, Hall had served as pastor in some twenty churches.¹⁴ Hall also served for several years as association treasurer and frequently served as a delegate to meetings of other associations and the Florida Baptist State Convention. On one occasion he traveled to Atlanta for the Southern Baptist Convention but stopped en route in Americus, Georgia, to visit his uncle and other relatives and review "the scenes of his boyhood."¹⁵

Service as Sunday School Missionary

In 1880 Hall became one of the first members of Florida Baptists new State Board of Missions.¹⁶ Given his broad exposure to dozens of churches from his service as a missionary, Hall was a logical choice to be appointed in 1884 to serve as the first state Sunday school missionary. The following year he reported to the state convention that 260 services for children had been held; 31 mission bands had been organized; 18 Sunday schools organized; and 359 religious books sold.¹⁷

Using the pen name "Uncle Hall," Hall expanded his children's ministry through a popular column in the *Florida Baptist Witness* newspaper in the mid-1880s, providing children with "spiritual advice, personal encouragement, and promotional help to all his spiritual nieces and nephews."¹⁸

His columns included stories of his travels and responses to children’s letters.

His columns included stories of his travels and responses to children’s letters. He addressed the children as his nieces and nephews, providing them news of the churches he

visited, thanks to the families he met, and personal encouragement to those who wrote about sick relatives or were new to Mission Bands. During one visit to Madison County over a 22-day period in the spring of 1885, Hall was scheduled for thirty-five commitments in eighteen different communities. The *Florida Baptist Witness* encouraged attendance, promising that “the children will be delighted by his sweet songs; the older ones will be benefited by his words of counsel; and we are sure that those who hear Bro. Hall once, will want to hear him again.”¹⁹

The newspaper called Hall a “zealous and efficient missionary,” and from the letters the newspaper received, the editors were assured that Hall was “leading many of the young to the Redeemer.”²⁰ But the Sunday school ministry kept him on the road. Hall noted in one of his columns from July 1885 that he had just returned home after an absence of about ten weeks, during which he traveled 1,015 miles by horse and buggy.²¹ The range of his travels expanded south, encompassing Fort Christmas, Kissimmee, and Bartow.

In one particularly poignant column, Hall wrote of his visit to his old church at Sopchoppy, where he had “found the girl, Amanda M. E. Mobley, who became [his] wife about twenty years ago.” He wrote of how she had to fill the place of both mother and father to their children, training them and looking after home affairs, because he had been “absent in pastoral and missionary work for about three-fourths of [his] time during all of these years.” Hall called Amanda “the greatest blessing” he had ever had, and he asked the children who prayed for him to also pray for “Aunt Hall, who enables [him] to go and tell them about Jesus.”²²

Hall Signed Promissory Note for DeLand College

Given Hall's commitment to education, Hall was extremely supportive of plans to establish a Baptist college in Florida. Henry A. DeLand, a New York manufacturer who wintered in Florida, pledged his financial support to the new school if the State Convention contributed \$10,000.²³ However, when the State Board of Missions found itself unable to raise the promised amount, it appeared DeLand would withdraw his offer if the \$10,000 was not produced within two months.²⁴ In March 1887, Hall and twelve other men signed a \$10,000 promissory note which made all of them individually liable for the money if churches came up short on donations for the college. As Florida Baptist historians Donald Hepburn and E. Earl Joiner noted, "Those men – whether unwittingly or with a high degree of confidence that the churches would eventually donate the \$10,000 – took the State Convention's responsibility on themselves as individuals."²⁵ This was an extraordinary risk on Hall's part, who was not off the hook financially for this note until the State Convention ratified the note in 1890.²⁶

From Pastoral Ministry to Mission Work

Hall remained active in Baptist ministry in north Florida through at least 1891. At the 1890 state convention in Monticello he presented a paper at the Pastor's Conference on "Work Among Children."²⁷ At the January 1891 state convention in Pensacola, he conducted the Sunday children's meeting and addressed the Sunday School Mass Meeting at John the Baptist, a historic African-American church.²⁸ However, the Santa Fe River Association annual minutes make no further mention of Hall after 1891, the year in which he turned 50 years old. He had long suffered from rheumatism and the grueling schedule of the previous 25-years had perhaps taken its toll because it appears that he was never again an active church pastor after 1891. That was not the end of his ministry, however. He and Amanda moved to Rudden (Putnam County), Georgia, in 1899, where they lived with three of their children, all of whom were schoolteachers.

Hall continued to perform mission work throughout various south Georgia counties. Hall visited a half-brother in Miami in early 1902 and became “charmed with the place and climate.”²⁹ He moved there with Amanda and three of his children later that year. According to his 1911 obituary, Hall continued to perform “a great deal of missionary and ministerial work” after he moved to Miami.³⁰ Those to whom he ministered included those “in the jail and among

Hall continued to perform “a great deal of missionary and ministerial work” after he moved to Miami

the sailors, also among the poor and destitute” of all races.³¹ On Sunday afternoons, Hall, likely recalling how much worship had meant to him when he was a prisoner, conducted

religious services in the Dade County jail. He returned to Georgia over the summers of 1904 and 1905 on evangelical missions.³²

By 1907, Hall was totally disabled from working due to his health, but he began receiving a \$100 annual state pension for Confederate veterans. He had to provide extensive documentation to support his application, including a list of assets, which after four decades of preaching consisted of only \$100 in personal property.³³

Hall died, at the age of 70, of a “long lingering illness” described as a “general breakdown” on June 8, 1911.³⁴ The *Miami Herald* wrote that he had made “a great many friends” and that he was always “kind, gentle in manner, and did a great deal of good, especially in missionary work.”³⁵ His tombstone at Miami-Dade Cemetery reads “Forever with the Lord.”³⁶ Amanda, who died on October 1, 1928, is buried with her husband.³⁷

Boykin’s words in 1881 provide the best summary of Hall’s service to his Lord and to his church: “Few men of like

opportunities have been more useful; few, under similar circumstances have had their labors more blessed.”³⁸

ENDNOTES:

AUTHOR’S NOTE: The author extends her deep appreciation to Penny Baumgardner and Donald S. Hepburn of the Florida Baptist Historical Society and to Arlene Vause and Debbie Joy of the Wakulla County Historical Society for their research assistance.

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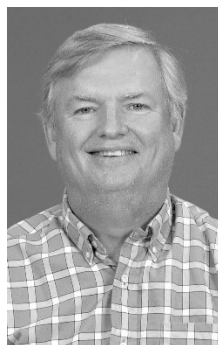
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The Sunday School Ministry's Value to the 21st Century's Local Church

*by Stephen "Spike" Hogan, DMin
Lead Pastor, Chets Creek Church
Jacksonville, Florida*



For years, Southern Baptists have understood the importance of Sunday school as a powerful tool to help people grow in their faith. Something that set us apart was our utilizing the Sunday school for the purpose of teaching and studying God's Word for every age group in the church. Sunday school was important and prioritized in our denomination and was seen, along with missions and theological training, as the glue that held us together. I'm afraid times have changed.

I heard someone say several years ago that the "Southern Baptist pastor has divorced his minister of education (his director of Sunday school) and married his minister of music." What was meant by that adage was the belief the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention had allowed the Sunday morning worship experience to take a higher priority than the work of the Sunday school, relegating it to a secondary ministry of the church and not recognizing the powerful tool it can be.

Please don't hear what I am not saying, rather worship and the preaching of God's Word should have a high priority in the church. But, according to Jesus, we also are called to make disciples, teaching them to observe all things, which I believe Sunday school still has the power to do. Let me share with you why I believe Sunday school, LifeGroups (the name we coined for Sunday school 24 years ago) or whatever you choose to call it, can still be a great tool to help the church fulfill its God-given mission.



An Advocate of the Sunday School Movement

The Sunday school movement began in England in the 1750s for the purpose of educating poor children who were working in factories six days a week. Although not the founder, Robert Raikes is considered the “Father of the Sunday school movement” due to his advocacy of it. As a Christian newspaperman, he saw the plight of these children and used his influence to support and encourage the starting of Sunday schools across England. He believed that the answer to helping these children being released from their cycle of poverty was teaching them to read, using the Bible as the curriculum and lay teachers leading these groups. He also recognized that the majority of men in prison lacked education and any hope for future advancement yet he also saw the Sunday school as an answer to respond to that crisis as well.

In 1757, Raikes strongly supported the Sunday school movement by helping to start a Sunday school for boys who lived in the slums of Gloucester which led to other groups for

boys and eventually Sunday schools for girls as well.¹ In fact, by 1831, despite much controversy and people in England attacking this movement, there were estimates of over 1,250,000 children every week involved in a Sunday school.²

This movement was so powerful in England it brought about a complete change of thinking leading to state funding for these schools and ultimately leading to free public education for children in England.

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Southern Baptists' Arthur Flake Strategy

The Sunday school movement was considered so successful it moved beyond England into other countries, including the United States by the 1790s. It began in the northeast, following the model started in England serving children who were working in factories six days a week. Later it became a ministry of the local church, especially in the Methodist and Baptist denominations. Southern Baptists adopted Sunday school as a way to disciple, not just children, but all members of the church. Recognizing the possibilities of Sunday school, in 1920 they hired a Baptist lay leader, Arthur Flake, the Sunday School director of First Baptist Church, Winona, Mississippi, to become the first Southern Baptist Convention director of Sunday school. What they saw in him as a church and association Sunday school leader was someone who understood the possibilities of Sunday school.

**Southern Baptists
adopted Sunday
school as a way
to disciple**

Flake, taking over as leader of Southern Baptists' Sunday schools' movement nationally, was the first to understand how to use the Sunday school, not just as a teaching ministry, but also as a reaching ministry

of the local church. He began to work with state conventions and associations, teaching them the five principles that he utilized in his own church and association. These were the

same principles he used as a shoe salesman and have become known as Flake’s Formula. Flake stated that to have an effective Sunday school churches should do the following:

Know your Possibilities – Beginning with your church membership and those in the community, find every possible person that could be a member of your Sunday school;

Enlarge the Organization – He believed that you had to have an organization that would allow for new people to join. He believed every age deserved a place to learn and grow. In fact, he suggested to not expect God to send people if you don’t have a place for them;

Enlist and Train Workers – Flake believed that a Sunday school was only as good as its trained workers. He believed in the practice of enlisting and training committed workers;

Provide Adequate Space – He stated that one of the greatest obstacles to a great Sunday school was adequate and useable space for every age group; and

Go After the People – It is interesting to note that he challenged churches to do the first four steps before you begin to go after the people. Flake was one of the early proponents of surveying a community to discover and invite people to church.³

When you look at Arthur Flake’s Formula you will be quick to understand that these principles still work today if you work them. As simple as this is, if a church wants to move from being just an attractional church to becoming a connecting church, you begin with Arthur Flake’s teaching and training from over 100-years ago.

Florida’s Andy Anderson and Growth Spiral

In the 1980s there was a new emphasis on using Sunday school strategically to reach and teach. I heard Harry Piland, the then director of Sunday school, Baptist Sunday School Board, say that the Sunday school was the church organized to do the Great Commission. He and others during this time understood the possibilities Sunday school held to grow the

local church. Out of this renewed vision, a Florida pastor, Andy Anderson, took Flake's Formula even a step farther.

Anderson was a pastor of a church in Ft. Myers, Florida, and he began to recognize the power of Flake's Formula as an evaluation and planning tool. Out of his personal journey, he created what became known as the Sunday School Growth Spiral. He taught that churches could effectively plan for reaching, teaching, and ministering to people utilizing eight key priorities. He also found that when you understood these key areas, you had great evaluation, planning, goal-setting and administrative tools. Andy Anderson taught and trained thousands of church workers and leaders to utilize his Growth Spiral and we saw Sunday schools grow and reach people across the Southern Baptist Convention.

**churches could
effectively plan for
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and ministering
to people**

The eight priorities for an effective Sunday school according to Andy Anderson are:

Enrollment – How many are actively enrolled in the church's Sunday school?

Prospects – How many names, addresses, and phone numbers do you have of potential prospects for your Sunday school including church members not enrolled in Sunday school? Studies show that a growing Sunday school has as many prospects as it does Sunday school members;

Teaching units – How many classes, do you have? Are there enough to adequately care for every member and enough to have room for new people as they come?

Workers – How many Sunday school workers do you have? Do you have enough workers to meet the needs of the class and to reach new people as well?

Workers meeting attendance – How many are attending Sunday school leaders' meetings? This is

the glue that creates unity and fellowship among the leaders;

Training awards – How many are involved in leadership training? Do you have an effective leadership training plan?

Weekly contacts – How many people are being contacted and invited to Sunday school each week? Is there a plan to reach out to members and guests? and

Outreachers – How many people are participating in reaching out to prospects? Do you have a plan to involve people other than the staff and Sunday school workers?⁴

Andy Anderson was a personal mentor and hero of mine. I met with him and he taught me the value of the Sunday school as one of the greatest tools to do the work of the church. I remember his comments about how churches can get out of balance. Some emphasized evangelism without a plan for those coming to Christ to connect with the local church and grow in their faith. He talked about how some churches emphasized discipleship with little or no evangelistic outreach; the point being to basically teach each other how to “grow deeper.” I am thankful for Andy’s involvement in my life and will always be indebted to him.

Looking back can be fun and inspiring and maybe a little frustrating as we consider the value and worth of Sunday school today. As you can tell, I think it is imperative to understand our past if we are going to learn from it and move forward. So how do we move ahead with this new generation? Can we learn from past Sunday school leaders and utilize their principles to reach people today? I think we can. Let’s look at Sunday school for a new day.

Sunday School for a New Day

In 1995, Rick Warren wrote his book *The Purpose Driven Church*. He states that, according to the Great Commandment and the Great Commission, the church has five distinct purposes and he elaborates on them.

Jesus in the Great Commission said: *“Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Matthew 28:19 – 20 (NIV). And in the Great Commandment He said: *“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”* Matthew 22:37 – 40 (NIV).

Rick Warren believed that these two verses give the church its marching orders. He believed, like Andy Anderson, that a church that over-emphasizes one area and underemphasizes another was out of balance and weak. From these two most important statements by Jesus, Rick Warren pointed us to what he believed were the five purposes of the church:

1. To *“Love the Lord your God . . .”* is **worship**, expressing love to God. Churches grow **STRONGER** through worship;
2. To *“Love your neighbor as yourself . . .”* is **ministry**, meeting needs with love. Churches grow **BROADER** through ministry;
3. To *“Go and make disciples . . .”* is **evangelism**, sharing the Good News with others. Churches grow **LARGER** through evangelism;
4. To *“Baptize them . . .”* is **Biblical fellowship** (*Koinonia*), Christians doing life together. Churches grow **WARMER** through fellowship; and
5. To *“Teach them all things . . .”* is **discipleship**, helping believers grow spiritually. Churches grow **DEEPER** through discipleship.⁵

These five purposes have been widely accepted as Biblical truth and many pastors have come to agree with Warren's understanding of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. The problem is what do churches have in

place to carry out these five purposes? What programs and processes are in place to help members be Great Commission and Great Commandment Christians? It seems in this generation, we have come to believe that if we just have good sermons and good worship services, we can grow the church. I’m convinced that for a church to be a Great Commission and Great Commandment church it must have a plan to create and carry out a balanced approach that includes all five of these purposes. The Sunday school, or as we call them, LifeGroups, can help fill that role. Let me share with you some things we have discovered and believe are imperative to utilize Sunday school to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

The Chet’s Creek Church Approach

As pastor of Jacksonville’s Chet’s Creek Church, I have implemented an action plan to fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment by identifying five basic questions and responding accordingly, for your consideration. These are our on-going strategies for continuously building the Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry.

FIRST, do you know your POSSIBLE SUNDAY SCHOOL/LIFEGROUP MEMBERSHIP? For people to grow in their faith, they need to be connected to other Christians. If all a person does is come into a worship service, sit down, and watch and listen, they will never become a fully devoted follower of Christ. We have a saying at Chets Creek Church that “*Christians that just sit and soak will sin and sour.*” Jesus didn’t try to do ministry all my himself and neither should we. That is why one of the most important lists in the church is the active member and prospect (guests) list. These are your possible people, from birth to senior adult, who can be enlisted and connected to your Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry. This number will show you what your possibilities are to grow an effective Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry. Without this number there is no way to plan and set goals for the future. Everyone won’t

join, but a healthy Sunday school ministry will have somewhere from 60 – 75 percent enrolled in a group. That should be the goal for a healthy, growing church.

SECOND, if your goal is to have 60-75 percent of your active members enrolled in your Sunday school/LifeGroups, WHAT IS THE ORGANIZATION YOU WILL NEED to pull this off? Are you lacking any age groups in your organizations? Are there any holes? After looking at the total number of church members and active prospects you can take that number and multiply it by say 65 percent and see what your enrollment goal would look like. You will be surprised of the possibilities to grow and develop your church through the Sunday school. I have found that Sunday schools are usually made up of about 50 percent adults and the other 50 percent preschool, children and students. With that in mind, what would your organization need to look like to take care of this number of people? It may seem overwhelming but I am amazed at how putting things down on paper, setting faith goals, encourages us and I have found that God blesses that kind of faith.

THIRD, after seeing your potential members and then putting together an organization to include 60-75 percent of them in Sunday school/LifeGroups . . .you then consider HOW MANY LEADERS WILL YOU NEED to meet this goal. We have found that every group needs multiple leaders, making sure every preschool, children's and student group had three - plus leaders and each adult group has co-leaders. By the way, it's not just finding leaders who are willing, but also making sure we train these leaders to be effective for their specific age group. I believe that God will provide for us everything we need in the area of leaders, but if we don't by faith plan for reaching more people, why would He send us more leaders? Challenging people to accept God's call to serve in this most important ministry is key to an effective Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry. It's our job to enlist, train, and provide the necessary resources for an effective Sunday school/LifeGroups leader.

FOURTH, after recognizing how many groups we need and then realizing the number of leaders we need, we have to consider one thing that can be the lid keeping our Sunday schools/LifeGroups from growing. That question is HOW MUCH SPACE WILL YOU NEED to reach your growth potential? Here is a truth I want you to understand. You probably have more space than you realize. Here are a few things to consider. First, think about how many times and by whom a room can be used. Second, determine from the start the children’s space always comes first. Adults need to learn to be inconvenienced; children should not be. Third, every group might not need a room. Are there halls or other open areas available. Fourth, every Sunday school/LifeGroups class doesn’t have to meet on Sunday mornings. Young adults without children and senior adults, can easily meet at a different day and time. Creative leaders find creative ways to utilize space for their Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry.

LAST, as Arthur Flake said, GO AFTER THE PEOPLE. Set a target date to re-launch your newly prioritized Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry. Call, write, announce, and encourage, your people to get involved in this most important ministry. As you start this emphasis, realize that it is an ongoing, living, breathing organization. You will need to constantly look to enroll new members, enlist new leaders, look for more space, and grow your Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry. The bottom line is, it is work, but it is well worth it. So let me share with you why an effective Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry is important.

Your Sunday school/LifeGroups enrollment will show you those you can count on. I have found that those that are active in Sunday school tend to be “all-in” for the church.

Your Sunday school/LifeGroups classes are the easiest way to take care of and minister to your members. There is no way a church can hire enough ministry leaders to take care of

the needs of its membership. The best way to care for members is through the Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry

Your Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry is the best way to enlist, train, and grow new leaders. There are more ways to serve in this ministry beyond just teaching. Prayer ministry, hospitality ministry, care ministry, among others, are all important roles in each group.

Your Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry is a powerful tool to help disciple your members. When people take time to study His Word, share, pray, and do ministry together plus care for each other they are fulfilling the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

Your Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry is the organization that is in place for churches to carry out the Biblical fellowship (Koinonia) that was established in the first century church. I cannot tell you the number of people who have told me that it was in their LifeGroup that they discovered what it meant to be an active part of a great church.

There is nothing new in this article. For many of you it is just a reminder of what we have already heard and probably already know. But most of our people don't do what they already know to do, do they? So, my challenge to me and to you is to not miss the opportunity that this organization/organism we call Sunday school/LifeGroups holds for us. To help us fulfill God's Great Commission and Great Commandment, let me suggest making the Sunday school/LifeGroups ministry a greater priority. May God richly bless you as you seek to use this great tool to grow your church, and most importantly, grow Heaven as well.

Thank you, Arthur Flake, Harry Piland, Andy Anderson and the countless other leaders who taught us so well. May we teach the next generation of the power of this important ministry.

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Floridian Homer L. Grice Developed Vacation Bible School for Southern Baptists

*by Penny Baumgardner
Freelance writer
Graceville, Florida*



In the late 1960s my grandparents lived in a home on the property of the church where my grandfather served as a Florida Baptist pastor. My sisters and I would spend every summer there. One of the highlights of our visit was attending vacation Bible school. I have many fond memories of listening to the Bible stories our teachers shared while looking at the beautiful lithograph posters or watching as the Bible story came to life on the felt board. Participating in the craft projects was always an enjoyable time. However, I believe the thing that left the most lasting impression and influence on my adult life were the general assembly's where everyone participated. Lining up outside of the main entrance to the church, being chosen to carry one of the flags or the Bible was always a high point in the week. Once inside the sanctuary singing hymns and pledging allegiance to the American and Christian flags and the Bible was very heartwarming. I truly believe learning and reciting those pledges laid a foundation in the feelings and beliefs I developed for my country and my God.

Later in life as I progressed from a V.B.S. student to an assistant worker or teacher I noticed a change in how the vacation Bible school program began to evolve. No longer did we rely on the lovely lithograph posters or the felt story board. The church sanctuary or fellowship hall might be transformed into a winter wonderland with igloos made of milk cartons and the Sunday School rooms converted into snowy landscapes or cozy mountain cabins. Or perhaps they would be transformed into scenes allowing the



Homer L. Grice

students to image treks through the Rain Forest or a safari on the Serengeti grasslands, all depending on the theme of that year's Bible study focus. The assemblies also took on a new dynamic, they went from singing the familiar hymns to

songs especially written and choreographed to the theme of the current vacation Bible school curriculum. Even though the presentation of the vacation Bible school program has taken on a dramatic change the pledges are still recited and the desired outcome for the children remains the central focus, that is to plant the seed of salvation and to cultivate their Christian walk.

The aforementioned recollections of those summer days participating in my grandparents' church's vacation Bible school are very special to me. I have since come to learn that many of those experiences fit right into the Southern Baptist rational and concept of the vacation Bible school. Actually, V.B.S. is based upon the premise and programming plan of the Sunday school, except that V.B.S. is a multi-hour, multi-day, event held in the summertime when children are not attending public school. According to Homer Grice, the vacation Bible school provides for children "an opportunity to learn how to sing, to pray, to worship, to study the Bible, to put into practice the spiritual messages daily imparted to them."¹

Homer L. Grice as a Pacesetter

Homer Lamar Grice was born in Citra, Florida, and at age 41 was selected to initiate and develop Southern Baptists' vacation Bible school program, as a part of the Baptist Sunday School Board's Sunday school department ministry.

When Grice was selected to lead the then-called "Daily Vacation Bible School" program he was serving as pastor of the First Baptist Church, Washington, Georgia, where he had been since 1915. Having a heart for the evangelization of unchurched children, Grice decided to conduct a summer version of

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Sunday school, except it was held every weekday morning for several weeks. “In his own church in Washington, Georgia, Grice found that the vacation Bible school could be a key part of outreach and evangelism efforts,” feature writer Frank White reported.²

Although Grice is credited with developing the D.V.B.S. program ministry for Southern Baptist churches, he did not originate the concept. In fact, when he started the “Daily Vacation Bible School” in rural Georgia, he was adapting a ministry concept that had begun modestly in 1898 in New York City and that became more widely promoted after the beginning of the twentieth century.

Brief History of the V.B.S. Ministry

“The first vacation Bible school called the ‘Everyday Bible school,’ like the first Sunday school, was an effort to care for the spiritual needs of neglected children. They were mostly immigrant children, playing in the streets during the summer days, on New York City’s East Side,” wrote Homer Grice, who collected original documentation and chronicled the movement’s early history.³ A woman named Mrs. Walker Aylett Hawes, and a member of New York City’s Epiphany Baptist Church, had a passion to minister to those unsupervised children on the streets.

In July, 1898, Mrs. Hawes “rented a beer parlor (not used in the daytime) from a saloonkeeper,” recounts Grice, and “for six weeks had a school for the children of the neighborhood.”⁴ Mrs. Hawes divided her schools into three classes – one for older boys, one for older girls, and one for a mixed group of younger boys and girls.⁵ The programming consisted of the children singing hymns, memorizing long passages of Scripture, making of crafts and studying the Bible together.⁶

The summer program, being so well received by the community, resulted in Mrs. Hawes’ holding schools the following summers between 1899 and 1904. Unfortunately

for the ministry's continuation, Mrs. Hawes' husband retired from his medical practice and the couple moved from New York to their hometown of Charlottesville, Virginia.

However, Mrs. Hawes' organization and programming plans were taken over by Dr. Robert G. Boville, the corresponding secretary of the New York City Baptist Mission Society. As early as 1901, Boville had conducted a similar summer ministry consisting of five schools to reach children. Wisely, Boville adapted Mrs. Hawes' more varied program of activities to the City Mission Society's efforts.

In 1904, Boville resigned from the Mission Society and for the next two years (1905-06) he promoted the schools as interdenominational ministry efforts. Subsequently, in 1911 Boville "organized the Daily Vacation Bible School Association,"⁷ which promoted the ministry to churches in major cities. In rather short order, the summer ministry was embraced and adapted by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (1910), Northern Baptists, and by 1924 Southern Baptists assigned the ministry to the Baptist Sunday School Board.⁸

The action by Southern Baptists was a response to a growing interest and suggestions made by pastors to S.B.C. leaders between 1918 and 1923.⁹ Finally, during the 1924 Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, the report of the Baptist Sunday School Board noted, "The Board in addition to all its other work is now actively promoting 'The Daily Vacation Bible School.' This promises, in the next few years, to become a matter of great concern to many of our churches. We heartily concur in this forward step which promises leadership and literature under direct denominational auspices for this important line of instructional work."¹⁰

The following year, I. J. Van Ness, the corresponding secretary of the Baptist Sunday School Board, presented to the annual Convention meeting Homer L. Grice, who had been enlisted the prior September, 1924, to lead the D.V.B.S. ministry. Van Ness explained that Grice, "brought to his task

expert knowledge which immediately became fruitful. He has worked with diligence and already has started a great movement for the 'Daily Vacation Bible School.' He estimates that nearly 1,000 such schools will be held among Southern Baptists the coming summer."¹¹

Homer Grice's Pioneering Efforts

As noted previously Homer Grice did not develop the V.B.S. concept, but he did pioneer in developing and modeling the summer ministry for Southern Baptist churches. "Homer Grice was a young pastor in Georgia and was struck by the

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the 'Daily Vacation
Bible School.'**

growing V.B.S. trend. His church, First Baptist Church of Washington, Georgia, built a new education building in 1921. Grice and his wife Ethel wanted to see the space used. So, they decided to embark on a V.B.S. journey of their own, holding their first school in

the summer of 1922."¹² Grice said in a years later interview that the idea to conduct a Baptist version of the summer ministry was based upon two factors. First, was the construction of a new building with available space. And, secondly, he recalled having read about the growing ministry in several national religious publications.¹³

He held schools in the summer of 1922, 1923, and 1924. Grice described the need during the summer months, "the children were loose. . . running all over town. . . [with] no organizations to direct them. . . nowhere to go and nothing to do."¹⁴ Grice concluded, to turn the children's idleness into something positive could be achieved by conducting a vacation Bible school.

According to Melita Thomas of the LifeWay Christian Resources, in an on-line blog, told how Grice came to be enlisted to lead Southern Baptists' D.V.B.S. ministry:

“Pastor Homer Grice wrote to *The Christian Index* about how vacation Bible school had worked in his church in Washington, Georgia, for the past two years. The church held its first vacation Bible school in 1922 with an average attendance of 150 for the 20-day school. After reading Grice’s report in the state Baptist paper, Dr. Van Ness, the leader of The Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote Grice expressing frustrations with the Sunday School Board’s inability to move forward with a strong vacation Bible school program and promotion plan.

“Van Ness invited Grice to use 20-minutes of the hour allotted to the Sunday School Board at the annual Convention meeting to speak about vacation Bible school. In a three-page response to Van Ness’ invitation, Grice outlined ways the Sunday School Board could promote vacation Bible school, thus creating his own job description. He became director of the new department that was to be formed for vacation Bible school later in 1924.”¹⁵

Developing Southern Baptists’ Newest Ministry

When Grice began his work at the Baptist Sunday School Board in the fall of 1924, he had to start “with a blank slate.” As one later co-worker explained, “There was no organization, no literature, no advisers, no curriculum committee, no prepared writers in the field,” among other things.¹⁶

Almost immediately Grice determined that the D.V.B.S. ministry “could not be promoted without adequate literature and materials for the [local church] workers.”¹⁷ As a result, Grice set about to create a guidebook and a series of thirteen teacher books for the workers assigned to the various target age (5 to 17 years old) groups – Beginner, Primary, Junior and Intermediate. “He decided that the books should be simple and untechnically written, with detailed guidance, so

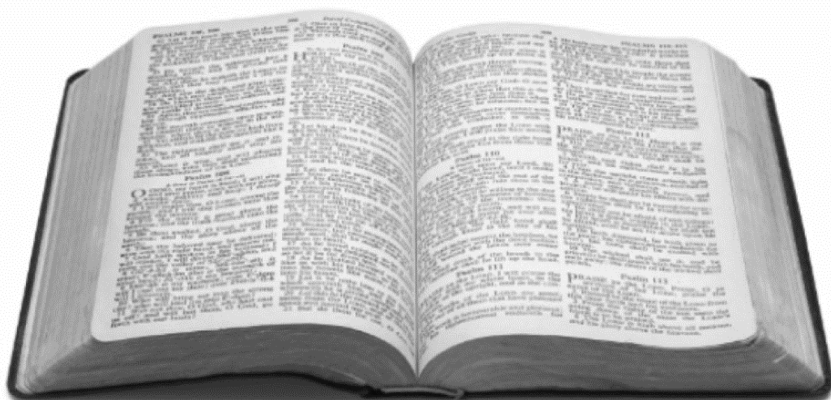
that inexperienced workers anywhere could take the books and put on a good school.”¹⁸ Additionally, Grice defined a course of study for his writers to follow, established the plan of operation, formulated methods of procedure, devised means for training church and denominational leadership and developed a program of promotion.

At the nexus of Grice’s program concept was to give “children a daily program to minister to physical, mental, moral, and spiritual needs. He incorporated a patriotic regimen with the still-familiar opening exercises of pledges to the United States flag, the Christian flag, and the Bible.” Interestingly, “Grice wrote the pledge to the Bible that is still used today” in vacation Bible schools.¹⁹

Between 1925 and 1928, “the first series of lessons had been completed,” and “no less than one half of the program contents of the twelve books had been written” by Grice.²⁰ The other two key writers were Miss Mattie C. Leatherwood and Grice’s spouse Ethel H. Grice, an educator in her own right.²¹ In a story about his calling, Grice said, “the Holy Spirit had inspired” him with a vision for D.V.B.S. reaching multitudes. In order to accomplish that, the “curriculum must be usable by the most inexperienced teacher,” he stressed.²²

**“Grice wrote the
pledge to the Bible
that is still used
today” in vacation
Bible schools.**

Several Florida Baptist churches were among the early adopters and pacesetters by embracing the D.V.B.S. ministry. As an example, Grice reported, “Southern Baptists had about 400 Daily Vacation Bible schools in 1926, the second year of the Sunday School Board’s promotion of these schools.” The report noted that among those schools, “Twelve schools reported an enrollment of more than 300.” Included among those pacesetters and their enrollment were:



Pledge to the Bible

Written by Homer L. Grice

"I pledge allegiance to the Bible, God's Holy Word, I will make it a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path and will hide its words in my heart that I might not sin against God. Amen."

First Church, Ft. Lauderdale, 435; First Church, Tampa, 364; and First Church, Orlando, 339.²³

A decade after having started the D.V.B.S. ministry, Grice reported to the national Convention, "In 1925, the first year of the department's promotion, Southern Baptist churches reported 209 vacation Bible schools with a total enrollment of 28,167 faculty members and pupils . . . in 1934, they reported 753 schools, with a total enrollment of 100,902 . . . This was the first time that the total enrollment had passed 100,000." He went on to point out, "The smaller average enrollment in 1934 is to be explained by the fact that in 1925 nearly all of the schools were in the larger churches, whereas in 1934 many of them were in the open country and the villages."²⁴ By the time Grice retired in early 1953, the V.B.S. program had grown nationally to 24,335 schools with a

combined enrollment of 2,570,290.²⁵ As for Florida Baptists, in 1926, a total of 10 schools were reported with a combined enrollment of 2,486. In 1953, Florida had 842 schools with an enrollment of 122,595.²⁶ [See Appendix on page 150 for summary of vacation Bible school enrollment from 1925-2015.]

In the same 1935 annual report, Grice announced that the term “daily” had been dropped from the ministry’s designation. “When the schools were begun in New York City in 1901 as a phase of Baptist city mission work the word was necessary for a proper identification of the school, but it is not so now. Among Southern Baptists these schools are henceforth to be called the vacation Bible school.”²⁷

**Grice announced
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designation**

Once Grice had developed the curriculum, he set about traveling from state-to-state promoting and providing the training of the D.V.B.S. plan and purpose to state convention and local Baptist association leaders. These denominational leaders were expected to provide the promotion and teacher training to the local Baptist churches in their geographical purview.

When he was not developing V.B.S. resources, Grice was a dedicated Bible teacher. “Dr. and Mrs. Grice often traveled to the mountains of Tennessee and West Virginia to conduct Bible schools in regions where churches were unable to conduct the schools themselves. Homer and Ethel had a passion for proclaiming the gospel through the ministry of V.B.S.”²⁸

Even now, in the twenty-first century, “vacation Bible school continues to follow the learning by doing teaching philosophy which involves pupils in activities relating to and emphasizing biblical truth. Biblical content is interpreted

through the use of music, recreation, worship, drama, mission study” among other activities.²⁹

Grice’s Early Years

Before he was called to serve with the Baptist Sunday School Board in 1924, Grice spent the first 41 years of his life preparing for his future ministry.

Homer Lamar Grice (b. 1883; d. 1974) was the first born of Albert G. Grice (b. 1850) and Sarah Lee Bennett Grice (b. 1864) while the couple briefly lived in Marion (FL) County’s rural community of Citra. Grice, senior, was a mechanic who soon moved his wife and newborn to Edwardsville, Alabama. Between 1885 and 1899 the Grices added five sons and three daughters, while living in Alabama’s Cleburne County’s small town of Edwardsville.³⁰

The young Homer Grice at age 13, made a profession of faith and was baptized in the Baptist Church at Edwardsville. He attended the Cleburne Institute which covered the equivalent of high school plus an additional two years of specialized training, from which he graduated in 1901. Concurrent with the last two years of his studies, Grice served as a school teacher in a rural Alabama public school. He then entered Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, from which he received a bachelor degree in 1912. Grice surrendered to the call of God to enter the pastoral ministry and was licensed to preach. During his junior and senior years at Mercer, Grice served as a parttime pastor of the Hatley (Georgia) Baptist Church. The year following his college graduation, on June 22, 1913, he was ordained by the First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Ala.³¹ For several years, between 1902 and 1909, according to family reports, Grice worked parttime as a public-school teacher and for the U.S. Railway Mail Service.³²

While enrolled at Mercer, Grice met and subsequently married Fanny Ethel Harrison (b. ca. 1880; d. ca. 1960) of Birmingham, Ala., on August 12, 1912. The Grices had no

children, although it has been observed, “they parented millions of children through V.B.S.”³³ Following their marriage the couple moved to Arkadelphia, Arkansas, where he worked as a professor of English language and literature for Ouachita College (1913-1915). In 1915 Grice was called to serve as pastor of First Church, Washington, Ga., where he served until 1924. Concurrent with his primary pastorate, Grice also served as a parttime preacher at nearby Ebenezer Baptist Church (1918-1922) and the Clifford’s Grove Baptist Church (1919-1922).³⁴

After Grice joined the Baptist Sunday School Board in 1924, he discussed with the Board’s Corresponding Secretary I. J. Van Ness, that he needed more educational training. Subsequently, while working at the Board, Grice attended and graduated with an M.A. degree from Nashville’s George Peabody College for Teachers in 1928. Later, he did additional specialized studies at Boston University School of Religious Education and Social Service and Vanderbilt University.³⁵

After nearly 30 years of developing and promoting the V.B.S. ministry, Homer Grice was described as a “whole personality” that was “placed into the [V.B.S.] movement . . . and . . . its advancement,” wrote Jerome Williams of the Baptist Sunday School

**“He has thought,
prayed, planned,
read, dreamed,
written, talked,
preached, and
promoted vacation
Bible school work.”**

Board. “He has thought, prayed, planned, read, dreamed, written, talked, preached, and promoted vacation Bible school work. There is power in a consecrated personality.”³⁶

ENDNOTES:

EDITOR'S NOTE: Contributing material content and narrative to this article was Donald S. Hepburn

¹ Homer L. Grice, *The Vacation Bible School Guide*, (Nashville, TN: 1926; Rev. 1956), 15.

² Frank White, "Vacation Bible School, Founder's Dream Comes True," *The Baptist Program*, 1991, 8.

³ Homer L. Grice, "50-Years of Vacation Bible School Work," *The Sunday School Builder*, June, 1951, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Landry Holmes, *It's Worth It*, (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Christian Resources, 2018), 25.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Grice, "50-Years of Vacation Bible School Work," 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰ Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 1924, 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1925, 372.

¹² Holmes, 26.

¹³ Homer L. Grice interview by W. L. Howse, 1971; transcript from the Homer Grice Papers [AR. 795-576], held by the Southern Baptist Historical Archives and Library, Nashville, Tennessee, 7; hereinafter referred to as the Transcript of Howse Interview of Grice.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵ Melita Thomas blog @<https://V.B.S.lifeway.com/2017/01/21/>"Not Worthy to Walk in His Shoes - a Tribute to Dr. Homer Grice."

¹⁶ Jerome G. Williams, "Dr. Grice's Contribution as Editor," *The Sunday School Builder*, June, 1951, 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Melita Thomas blog.

²⁰ Williams, 14.

²¹ Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 1927, 389.

²² Holmes, 27.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 1935, 338.

²⁵ "Vacation Bible School Enrollment," *The Southern Baptist Handbook*, 1955, (Nashville, TN: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1925), 28.

²⁶ Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 1935, 338; also see "Vacation Bible School Enrollment," *The Southern Baptist Handbook*, 1955, (Nashville, TN: Baptist Sunday School Board, 1925), 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Melita Thomas blog.

²⁹ Arthur Burcham, "Vacation Bible School," *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, Vol. III, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971), 2033.

³⁰ Homer Lamar Grice, "Operation Baptist Biography Data Form for Living Person," the three-page document completed personally by Grice and submitted January 27, 1970, to an unknown depository; a copy is held in the biographical files of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida. Hereinafter referred to as Grice biography.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² "Homer L. Grice, Retired SBC Official Dies," *The [Nashville] Tennessean*, March 18, 1974, 7.

³³ Holmes, 28.

³⁴ Grice biography.

³⁵ Transcript of Howse Interview of Grice, 19.

³⁶ Holmes, 28.

Georgina Figueroa – A 70-year Legacy of Sunday School Ministry in Cuba and Florida

*By Keila Diaz
Digital Communications Assistant
Florida Baptist Convention*



Georgina Gonzales Figueroa was born in Santo Domingo, Las Villas, Cuba, on November 3, 1932. Her childhood and young adult life were framed by revolution and economic discontent in her homeland.

On the one side was the harsh dictatorship of the Fulgencio Batista regime beginning in the 1930s. This continued until 1959 with the revolutionary insurgence led by Fidel Castro. Against the backdrop of that on-going political struggle, was the consistent missionary work of Southern Baptists, especially Florida Baptists, who worked hard taking the Gospel to the hardest to reach places in the island nation. Georgina Figueroa came to know Christ as her personal Savior during a time of great social upheaval but incredible Gospel witness.

**teaching the Bible
through a Sunday
school ministry that
has spanned her
entire adult life**

Among the many who responded to the message of hope available from Jesus Christ proclaimed by the Baptists was Georgina Figueroa. Her life's work and her calling became committed to teaching the Bible through a

Sunday school ministry that has spanned her entire adult life. Her ardent passion to teach the word of God has made her a well-known servant among the South Florida Cuban Baptist community, even more so among Cuban believers. As she neared her 90th birthday in 2022, she recognizes that she has answered the calling God placed on her life.



Georgina Figueroa

Mrs. Figueroa's life and ministry are a direct result of Southern Baptist's missionary work in Cuba and her subsequent ministry in Florida have completed a mission's loop that will continue to propel the spread of the Gospel among Cubans. Her legacy is one of dedication, passion, and growth even amid difficult circumstances.

Growing Up in Cuba

As far back as she can remember Mrs. Figueroa loved to learn and loved to teach. It's no wonder then that as a child she would sneak out of her house in Santo Domingo and attend a Sunday school class just a few houses down from hers. Her mother, a Catholic, wanted Georgina to be a good Catholic too. But Georgina enjoyed the teachings at the Sunday school conducted in the house church pastored by a man she remembers simply by the name of Piña. She was 12 going on 13 years old when her Sunday school teacher invited the class of students to pray to accept Jesus as their savior. "I remember that all of us girls went up."¹ Not long after, pastor Alberto Ocaña, another pastor in the same town, baptized her in a nearby river.

Rev. Ocaña and his wife Alicia became mentors to Georgina during her teenage years in Santa Domingo. Alicia gave Georgina her first Bible and taught her to memorize Bible verses and stories. Under Alicia's guidance, Georgina's love for the word of God continued to grow and the more she learned the more she wanted to know. She was an exemplary Bible student, chosen many times to recite Bible verses before an audience, which she enjoyed very much.

**She was an
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before an audience.**

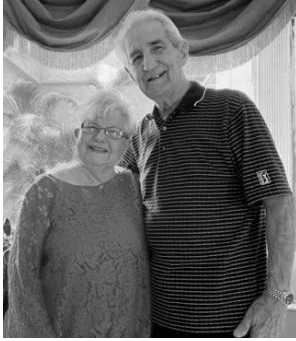
When she was just 18 years old, she was entrusted with her very own Sunday school class. "It was a young-adult class and some of the students were older than me," she recalled.²

On the weekends, Georgina caught a bus to Havana where she attended the Universidad de La Habana pursuing a doctor of education degree. During the week she worked at Colegio Bautista, a Southern Baptist-sponsored school housed in the facilities of Havana's Baptist Temple church. When she graduated in early 1952, she went on to apply for one of the very few and very coveted teaching positions in Havana and was selected.

A New Chapter in Her Life

Following her graduation, Georgina met, fell in love, and married Felix Abelardo Figueroa. Felix lived in Jicotea; a town close to Santo Domingo. He recalls visiting on a Sunday and seeing

Georgina walking alongside two friends down a wide, busy street. “I thought she was beautiful, so I walked up and walked with her for a while.”³ The next Sunday he returned to the same location, but couldn’t find her. Her friends told him she was a ‘church girl’ so he went to look for her there. “I sat next to her that Sunday. The next Sunday I prayed and accepted Jesus as my savior.”⁴



**Felix and
Georgina Figueroa**

They were married in 1964 at the historic Iglesia Bautista El Calvario by Pastor Ocaña who at the time served as pastor of the church. Nearly six decades later, that same church was destroyed by the gas explosion at the nearby Hotel Saratoga on May 6, 2022. The building was erected in 1880 and served as a theater formerly known as Teatro Jane. Under the leadership of Dr. I. T. Tichenor, executive secretary of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, the building was bought in January 1907.⁵ For many years the church served as the center of Baptist work by providing living quarters for the Southern Baptist Superintendent of Cuban Missions, and his family, teachers in the school, ministerial students, a few boarding pupils, and also served as the college assembly area, college classrooms and church auditorium.⁶

Escaping Communism

In 1959, the year Fidel Castro and his revolutionary forces took over Cuba, the Southern Baptist Convention *Annual* noted that there were 168 missionaries working in Cuba including their spouses, and there were 84 churches, 176 missions and a church membership of 8,561.⁷ There were 240 WMU societies and most of these traced their roots to the 1913 visit of Charlotte Peelman, W.M.U. Corresponding Secretary of the Florida Baptist Convention.⁸

Even though the Baptist work flourished in Cuba through the uncertainty of the 1960s, the Fidel Castro regime quickly cracked down on the already tentative religious freedom Cubans had which led Georgina and Felix to abandon their home and flee to Spain in 1969. The fascination Cubans first had with Fidel Castro and his revolution seems logical considering Cuban history. Under the

Batista government preceding Castro there was harsh treatment for those who disagreed, and Castro promised better education, less corruption, reform in the agrarian sector and economic expansion. All things that church leaders and members saw as important needs. The shift into socialism and communism in less than two years' time blind-sided the Cuban Baptist churches and its leaders, who found the suppression of Christianity even more severe.⁹

Southern Baptist Missionaries Expelled

"In July 1963, home missionary medical doctor, Lucille Kerrigan, of Kansas City, her adopted Cuban daughter, Susie, 15 and home missionary Ruby Miller of Ottawa, Kansas, were expelled from Cuba. They reached Miami on July 3, 1963, aboard the Red Cross ship *Maximus*," wrote Florida Baptist Historian Jerry Windsor. "This ship had carried supplies to Cuba as the last payment for the Bay of Pigs prisoner release. The ship sailed to Miami with 1,200 refugees aboard and that left only four Southern Baptist missionaries on the Island of Cuba. Herbert and Marjorie Caudill were in Havana, and David and Margaret Fite were in Fontanar." Kerrigan and Miller stated they did not know why they were expelled and noted, "We have left our hearts back there."¹⁰

In April 1965 Herbert Caudill, David Fite along with 53 other Cuban Baptist leaders were imprisoned including Georgina's pastor, Alberto Ocaña.¹¹ In 1968 the Cuban Western Convention reported 90 churches, 6,667 members and 161 baptisms. "New work was almost impossible. All church services were limited to church buildings making house churches illegal, denominational meetings required government approval and the home for the aged, the assembly, the seminary and the Voz Bautista enjoyed very limited freedom,"¹² L. D. Wood reported.

In 1972 Dr. Arthur Rutledge, the executive secretary-treasurer of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board (now the North

"The board no longer has missionaries in Cuba."

American Mission Board) reported to the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting. He said that the Board had 2,250 missionaries serving in all 50 states, in addition to those serving in Puerto Rico and Panama. Unfortunately, Ruthledge noted, due

to the political situation in Cuba, “The board no longer has missionaries in Cuba.”¹³

A New Homeland and a Vocational Calling

Georgina and Felix welcomed their daughter Ruth to the world during their first year in Spain after fleeing from Cuba in 1969. Three years later, the Figueroa family traveled to New York and lived there for three years. During that time Georgina worked in the J.C. Penney administrative offices during the day, caught a train after work to Montclair College where she took classes to revalidate her teaching credentials. Even then she continued to attend church and teach Sunday school classes at a local Baptist church.

In 1975 the family moved and settled in Miami, where there was a large and robust Cuban community. “I’ve had the calling to teach always; from the time I was a girl. It is a gift that the Lord has given me to teach,” said Georgina of her passion for teaching

**“I’ve had the calling
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during a recent interview in her Miami home.¹⁴ When the Figueras settled in Miami, they immediately sought out a Baptist church. For some time, they attended Iglesia Bautista Northside located in Hialeah (Rev. Alberto Ocaña’s son is now pastor) and then moved to Iglesia Bautista Coral Park.

In 1979, when Georgina and her family started attending Coral Park, it was the Hispanic ministry of Coral Park Baptist Church under the leadership of Rev. Kenneth Gaskin. In 1977 the Hispanic ministry was established as a church. “Pastor Gaskin had a great vision, he saw the changes that were coming, and he and the American church let the Hispanic church take over the building and the ministry,” recalls Georgina.¹⁵

Georgina was one of the four founding members of the current-day Coral Park Church. In August 1986 the church bought the building it occupies today which is often referred to as “La Ballena” or “The Whale,” because of its structure that resembles a whale. The building had previously been used as a synagogue. “It was [Pastor Jorge] Comesañas’ vision to buy that building for our

church,” she said. And even today members mark that purchase as a key historic moment in the life of the church. “Along with other founding members, we put our houses as collateral for a loan to buy it,” said Georgina.¹⁶

Once the Hispanic congregation was established, Georgina served as the Sunday school director in two separate terms of four years and later six years. Her ministry flourished under the pastorate of Rev. Jorge Comesañas (serving 1982-2007) whom she credits with supporting her ministry and her creative ideas to see it grow.

“She was a public-school teacher,” recalled Alex Comesañas, Jorge Comesañas’ son, “but her passion was the Sunday school. She was a teaching force to be reckoned with.”¹⁷

A Sunday School Enrollment Goal of 1000

In 1999 Georgina and Rev. Jorge Comesañas set a goal for the church to reach 1000 in Sunday school enrollment by the year 2000.

“We started doing Sunday school competitions between the classes as an incentive to invite others to the Sunday morning Bible classes,” remembers Georgina.¹⁸ To encourage participation and excitement surrounding Sunday school, Georgina set themes for the lesson plans. The teachers decorated their classrooms accordingly and even got into costumes depending on the week’s

**For Georgina
Figueroa,
evangelism and
Sunday school
are tied together.**

theme. The whole church participated in the competitions. Even the choir would sing songs on the Sunday school theme. The church reached its goal and to celebrate they released two thousand balloons into the air.

For Georgina Figueroa, evangelism and Sunday school are tied together. A good Sunday school ministry is essential to a healthy church, she explained. When Coral Park set the Sunday school goal, the church’s attendance number exploded, and they launched discipleship classes during the weekdays to complement the Sunday school classes and eventually life groups which they called “amor en acción.” “We encouraged our students to invite their family and friends that didn’t attend church to class, and they

would come, and many came to Christ through Sunday school,” she said.¹⁹

Georgina considers the Sunday school to be the backbone of the church. A sentiment matched by post-Civil War Florida Baptists who lamented in 1867, “the apathy in Sunday school work, which is second only in importance to the preached word, is the result of indifference and neglect on the part of both ministers and members.”²⁰

And because of her conviction she took the training of her teachers seriously by hosting annual training and meeting events an hour before regular Sunday school classes started to review questions and get everyone on the same page before students arrived.

She spent hours upon hours during the week preparing the lessons for her classes. Not just her Sunday school lessons but also for the life groups and discipleship classes she led on Tuesdays and Wednesdays respectively.

Georgina has seen first-hand how the church has evolved to make learning, discipleship, and fellowship not just something that happens on Sunday, but something that is part of the Christian believers’ life during the week. “I remember when it was Sunday school and nothing else. But these groups during the week are important and are good to the life of the church,” she said.²¹

Organized to Teach the Bible

In her home office she keeps the binders she prepared for each class containing copious handwritten notes, handouts, talking points and more. Some of her favorite Bible teachers are Priscilla Shirer and Beth Moore and she was inspired and informed by their content as she created her curriculum. But above all other books, the Bible is her ultimate guide.

Each of her students received a binder to keep their own notes and follow along with class readings and other assignments that Georgina prepared. All her classes were themed. When she taught the book of Thessalonians, she called her students “Princesas de Tesalonica” or “Thessalonian Princesses” and held a graduation for them when the semester ended. Graduations and celebrating accomplishments are important, she adds. It’s a simple and effective way to develop and encourage a love of learning the Bible

in believers. Her classes were popular among women, filling to capacity each semester.²²

In public school Georgina taught children, but in church she preferred to teach adults. “You can evangelize adults and go into deep topics with them. With children a lot of time is spent in discipline,” she said about her preference.²³

As part of her curriculum, she included missions and encouraged her students to support missionaries and she led by example. At one point she donated pieces in her home art collection to be sold and the funds used to support the missionary work through the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. Missions are important and she recognizes the role they played in getting the Gospel to her and her family. Her own sister and brother-in-law became missionaries and served in Colombia and Uruguay.

Unfortunately, the year 2020 COVID-19 pandemic brought Georgina’s popular classes to an end. A turn of events that brought her great sadness. Even after the world re-opened, Georgina’s health did not allow her to resume teaching. Still, she is thankful for the time she was able to teach. As she nears her 90th birthday, she says that she feels she has answered the call that God placed on her life.

Concluding Reflections

Although born in a small town in Western Cuba in 1932, Georgina Figueroa has led a life dedicated to teaching the Bible, the book that captured her heart and mind when she was just a 13-year-old girl. No one could take away her love for Sunday school then and no one could take it now. It lives in her and she has lived for it.

The Gospel reached her despite the obstacles that the political turmoil in Cuba posed during the 1950s and 1960s. As pointed out by Craig Culbreth about the work of Florida Baptists through the decades in Cuba, “obstacles and opportunities often go hand in hand in God’s economy.”²⁴

From the moment she could prepare a Sunday school class at the age of 18, Georgina Figueroa has been teaching children and adults the word of God and leading them to the feet of Jesus in the process.

While sitting in the living room of her Miami home alongside her husband, Georgina says that her passion for teaching the Bible lives in her heart and mind. “I am thankful that God has allowed me to serve in this way.”²⁵

ENDNOTES:

¹ Georgina and Alex Figueroa were interviewed by Keila Diaz in their Miami home on May 13, 2022; hereinafter referred to as Figueroa interview.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Loyd Corder, “Baptists in Cuba,” *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists Vol. 1*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1958), 339-342.

⁶ Jerry M. Windsor, “I Did Not Come to Have a Good Time,” *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, (2012), 42-53.

⁷ Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 1959, 221-222.

⁸ Jerry M. Windsor, “No. 981,” *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, (2012), 100.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹¹ L.D. Wood, “Missions in Cuba,” *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Vol. 3*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971), 1670.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Jerry M. Windsor, “The Board No Longer Has Missionaries in Cuba,” *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, (2012), 106.

¹⁴ Figueroa interview.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Figueroa interview.

¹⁷ Telephone interview on May 26, 2022, with Alex Comesañas by Keila Diaz.

¹⁸ Figueroa interview.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Donald S. Hepburn and E. Earl Joiner, *Favored Florida, A History of Florida Baptists, Vol. 1: 1784 – 1939*, (Gainesville, FL: StorterChilds Printing, Co., 2013), 213.

²¹ Figueroa interview.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Craig Culbreth, “Better Together,” *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, (2012), 115.

²⁵ Figueroa interview.

An Honor Roll of Florida Baptists' Long-term Sunday School Teachers



*Profiles drawn from the
Resources of the Florida Baptist
Historical Society*

The honor roll of all the men and women who have served since 1843 as Sunday school teachers and leaders in Florida is a noteworthy list. However, there is a group of teachers who have faithfully served for 30 or more years in sharing God's Word. Many of these had influence beyond their local church. The majority of these profiles are persons who served primarily as volunteers in their local church for many years. Although some individuals cited in this article were employed by a local church, their additional service as a volunteer Sunday school worker is honored. No claim is made or implied that the following profiles is an exhaustive listing, but rather a sampling of dedicated teachers who have served and still may be serving Florida Baptist churches during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

While both men and women have faithfully served, it is abundantly clear from the historic record that women, were the stabilizing and constant force that advanced the Sunday school ministry in most Florida Baptist churches. Women likely have made more contributions to the Sunday school ministry than can be recorded. As an example, in year 2,000, a recorded 548 (or 30 percent) of the 1,846 church Sunday school directors in Florida were women. "Sunday school work in Florida would be severely limited without so many outstanding directors, and countless teachers and other women Sunday school leaders,"¹ wrote former state Sunday school department director L. David Cunningham, who served from 1984 through 2001.

The following **honor roll** is a sampling of dedicated teachers who have served at least 30 years or more teaching God's Word:

Sylvia Ashby

Mrs. William A. (Sylvia) Ashby, by the year 2004 had completed nearly 60 years of ministry through Sunday school. Sylvia first began working in her church at Lancaster, Kentucky, when she



**Tom Chalker of Lake City's
First Baptist Church's
Sunday school class 1888**

was 15 years of age. Her first years were spent working with young people where she taught in vacation Bible school, B.Y.P.U., Y.W.A. and as a substitute teacher in Sunday school.

While at Georgetown University, she met William (Bill) Ashby and soon they were married. Following school at Georgetown, they moved to Louisville, Kentucky, where Bill entered the seminary in 1952. During Bill's seminary studies, Sylvia worked at the Kentucky Baptist Convention and as a secretary in a local Baptist church. Following Bill's seminary graduation, Sylvia served as a volunteer youth department director in virtually every church Bill Ashby was called to serve. These included churches in Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, and Florida Baptist churches in Delray Beach, Miami, Tallahassee and Jacksonville.

In 1982, they became members at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville. Sylvia was asked to help in the youth department, but by that time, she felt the Lord moving her into adult work. Within two months after joining First Baptist, she was serving as a group leader in her adult class. Within the year, she became a teacher of the class and in another year, she was asked to become the department director. In 2003, she became co-division director of the Senior Women's Division.

D. A. and Fenton Avant

Mr. and Mrs. Avant were Sunday school leaders for many years in Florida Baptist churches in the communities of Mt. Pleasant, Quincy and Tallahassee. Fenton (Garnett Davis) Avant graduated from what is now Florida State University in 1908 and received a master's degree in Greek in 1909, later teaching this subject at F.S.U. and Leon High School. For 18 years she was editor of the annual *Minutes* of the Florida Baptist Association.

Mr. Avant was clerk of the Florida Baptist Association and superintendent of Sunday schools in Quincy and in Tallahassee for more than 30 years. He and Mrs. Avant helped establish East Hill and Southside Baptist churches in Tallahassee.²

Janet Baxley

Mrs. Gordon (Janet) Baxley served as a role model for building Sunday schools. Her Sunday school story began in 1985 when Rev. Bill Stephens, a retired Baptist pastor, became part time interim pastor of the 97-year-old Leonia Baptist Church. Sunday school attendance had declined to five persons. Unwilling to see the Sunday school die, Rev. Stephens enlisted new member Janet Baxley as Sunday school director. Janet Baxley was not sure how to lead the Sunday school, but sought help from the Holmes

County Baptist Association's

Sunday School Assist Team. The team conducted training for prospective teachers. Mrs.

Baxley was encouraged to use the "people search" process in identifying prospects. Soon, the search discovered over 200

Sunday school prospects in their

rural community. Janet set up seven Sunday school classes, even though the church had never had that many before. Unable to

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prospects in their
rural community.**

afford literature, Baxley borrowed used Sunday school literature from neighboring churches.

She enlisted the Sunday school workers leaders and established a weekly training meeting. She did not think they would come, but soon she had more in weekly workers meeting than she had workers. Within 10 months they had enrolled 119 in Sunday school, added 34 church members and baptized 14 people. For months following, Leonia continued to grow and reach out to the community. The story of Leonia, called “The Church that Refused to Die” was the subject of a video production by the Florida Baptist Convention. The video was widely circulated, including being sent to every state convention Sunday school director in the S.B.C. The video is a classic on how to motivate people and grow a Sunday school in a small church setting.

Sherrill Boone

Sherrill Boone is the spouse of former Florida Baptist Convention Sunday school department director, John Boone (serving 2002 to 2015). She is a gifted adult and preschool conference leader in Sunday school work, where she has served as a Special Worker in Sunday school since 1988. She led conferences in the state, regional and association training events in Florida; served as a volunteer conference leader for Florida churches; as well as leading conferences for B.S.S.B./Lifeway at Ridgecrest and Glorieta Baptist Conference Centers and in a number of state conventions. She teaches adult Sunday school in her local church, and is uniquely gifted at motivating adult Sunday school leaders to use creative methods in their teaching ministries.

Doak Campbell

Doak Campbell was a long-time adult men’s Sunday school teacher and deacon at the First Baptist Church, Tallahassee. Dr. Campbell came to Florida in 1941 to serve as president of Florida State College for Women, later to become Florida State University.

A native of Arkansas, Dr. Campbell began teaching Sunday school at age 16. In Arkansas, he was a Sunday school field worker for Young People’s work for one year, and later was elected President, Arkansas Baptist State Convention. Once he re-located to Florida, he picked up where he left off in Arkansas. He served multiple terms as president of the State Board of Missions, Florida Baptist State Convention and one year as president of the state convention

in 1948. Active in the Florida Baptist Association, Campbell authored “The Florida Baptist Association, the First 100 Years, 1842-1942,” and “Why Do Teachers Teach, Sunday School Teachers Guide” in 1935.³

Nancy Cunningham

Nancy Bush Cunningham, spouse of retired former state Sunday school department director David Cunningham (serving 1984 through 2001), has served as a preschool specialist for the Florida Baptist Special Worker team since 1984. She began in preschool ministries at First Baptist Church, Orlando, in 1974. She worked with four years olds for 10 years, until she assumed the role of the division director for the four and five-year-old preschoolers. Then for eight years she served as the volunteer division director for all preschool ages at the 11:00 Sunday school hour.

After moving to Jacksonville, she joined the staff at First Baptist Church, Jacksonville Beach, where she served for five years as the early weekday education director. She was then called as the director of preschool and children’s work at Southside Baptist Church, where she served for several years. She has previously served as a Sunday school conference leader doing missions work in Pennsylvania, Montana, West Virginia, and her home state of Mississippi, as well as Canada, and as a V.B.S. leader in the Bahamas.

Catherine Dillard

Catherine Dillard in 1971 was among the original Florida Baptist Special Workers for the Sunday school department, specializing in preschoolers. She was a long-time member and Sunday school worker for Delaney Street Baptist Church, Orlando.

Her most distinctive role has been as a bridge between English and Spanish language Sunday school ministries.

Mrs. Rafael (Clysta Hill) de Armas

Clysta de Armas, a native of Greer, S.C., has been a Sunday school leader in Florida since coming to the state as a Southern Baptist Home Missionary in 1962. She was enlisted as a volunteer Florida Baptist Special Worker specialist in preschool and general officer leadership. Her most distinctive role has been as a bridge between English and Spanish language Sunday school ministries. In her

local church, association and state volunteer assignments, Clysta de Armas has been able to interpret, translate and adapt Sunday school materials and concepts from English to the Spanish culture and language.

Mrs. A. B. Duckworth

Mrs. Duckworth taught Sunday school for more years than anyone now knows. An article in a 1955 issue of the *Florida Baptist Witness* noted that Mrs. A. B. Duckworth had taught a ladies class for those 65 years of age and up at Woodlawn Baptist Church, Jacksonville. The article said, "She will be 94 years young next December 7, [1955]. It is often said by members of this well attended class that she is not 'still' a brilliant teacher in spite of her years, but . . .because of her many years of experience." Reflecting upon her years as a Sunday school teacher, she said, "I gave myself to the teaching of boys and girls; that is to the building of worthy citizens with right character."⁴

Georgina Gonzales Figueroa

Georgina Gonzales Figueroa was born in Cuba, during the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista regime from the 1930s until Fidel Castro overthrew the government. She was 12 years old when her Sunday school teacher invited her to pray to accept Jesus as her savior. When she was just 18 years old, she was entrusted with her very own Sunday school class to teach. The young-adult class had students older than Georgina.

Later Georgina Gonzales married Felix Figueroa and in 1969 the couple fled the communist restrictions of Castro. Subsequently, the Figueiros settled in Miami where Georgina resumed teaching at the Iglesia Bautista Coral Park. As the Sunday school director, she led a campaign to successfully enroll 1000 people in Sunday school. From the moment she could prepare a Sunday school lesson at the age of 18, and for the past 70 years, Georgina Figueroa has been teaching children and adults the word of God and leading them to the feet of Jesus in the process.⁵

Wayne Goff

Wayne B. Goff, of Punta Gorda, Florida, was involved in Sunday school work by the time he had graduated from the University of Florida in 1963. This fifth generation Floridian continued to devote his time and resources to Sunday school work across the state, nation and in international ministries. He divided his time

between Sunday school leader training and serving as a stewardship specialist for the Florida Baptist Convention, all the while managing his company, Goff Construction, Inc.

Brother Goff was Sunday school director and F.A.I.T.H. evangelism director for his church, First Baptist Church, Port Charlotte, and served for many years as volunteer Sunday school director for the local Baptist association.

On the state level, he served as a Florida Baptist Special Worker as a F.A.I.T.H. consultant, a building consultant and a church building conference faculty member. Additionally, he led Sunday School Growth Campaigns, Metro Growth Campaigns, Associational Leadership Training, and leadership conferences at Lake Yale Baptist Assembly among other training events.

Harriet Green

Harriet Green served Macedonia Baptist Church in Jacksonville, for over 40 years as a preschool Sunday school teacher. She claimed a record of almost perfect attendance, attending a church somewhere – except for one Sunday she was in the hospital. In a recognition service where her church honored her teaching service, more than 150 persons stood as “alumni” of her class of four- and five-year-olds. A mother of two sons, with eight grandchildren, she was active in a number of ministries of her church.⁶

Mrs. Rosetta Harris

Mrs. Harris served as the volunteer education director for Glendale Baptist Church, Miami, with Pastor Joe Coats for many years. When she was honored by her church for doing an outstanding work, she was asked to serve with the Miami Sunday School Team. Later Mrs. Harris was enlisted as a Florida Baptist Special Worker as a preschool specialist.

Pittman and Shirley Jernigan

Pittman and Shirley Jernigan have been Sunday school leaders in the Eden Baptist Church for many years. Shirley served as volunteer Sunday school director for the Alachua Baptist Association for a number of years. She began working with primary age-groups when she was 15 years of age. She later worked with Primaries, Intermediates – while she was still an

Intermediate herself – and Juniors. When she was 19, she started teaching young people for several years.

While she was still in the young people's age group, she began teaching adults. This was during WWII. Many of the men were gone for military service, and there were not many people left in the church to teach, so she began teaching adults in Sunday school.

Although most of their church life has been at Eden, a rural community in Alachua County, except for two times when the couple lived elsewhere. She taught youth and adults for four years at the Gateway Baptist Church, Miami. They also lived in South Georgia serving in Arlington Baptist Church for a period of about five years. There Pittman, served as the Discipleship director, taught mostly adults, and then taught Intermediates Sunday school.

Nancy Hughes

Nancy Henderson Hughes has served as a Florida Baptist Special Worker in Children's Sunday school since coming to Florida in 1983. A gifted conference leader for children's work, Nancy led conferences for the B.S.S.B./Lifeway in Florida, and at the Green Lakes Conference Center. She served in the children's ministries at her home church, the Amelia Baptist Church, in Yulee. A native of Vidor, Texas, Nancy grew up in a Baptist family and loves music, for which she is known for her lovely singing voice.

Frances Jensen

Mrs. Frances Jensen, since 1971, was an original Florida Baptist Special Worker specialist for children's work. Frances long-served Delaney Street Baptist Church, Orlando, in the children's ministries.

Wayne Joiner

Wayne Joiner served as teacher of the Senior Men's Bible Class at Central Baptist Church, Sanford, Florida, and was honored by his church for 50 years of perfect Sunday school attendance in 2004. He had not missed a Sunday school lesson in more than 2,600 consecutive weeks. Whenever he

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Sunday school
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weeks.**

travelled with his wife Nancy, the couple always found a Baptist church or gathered fellow travelers to study from the Baptist quarterly. He has taught Sunday school in several central Florida churches, as well as in Washington, D.C., Atlanta and Macon, Georgia.⁷

Mrs. J. A. Lamb

First Baptist Church, Palmetto, honored Mrs. J. A. Lamb on July 22, 1945, for 50 years of Sunday school service. She moved to Palmetto in October, 1894, and began as a substitute teacher for Junior boys and girls, and in 1945 was teacher of the T.E.L. Class.⁸

Frank Land

Frank Land, a licensed real estate broker in Fort Myers, distinguished himself by leading ACTION Sunday school enrollment growth events. A layman at Riverside Baptist Church, he probably has enrolled more persons in Sunday school than any other person in Florida. He details some of his experiences in the book, "How I Enrolled 250,000 in Bible Study." He admitted in his memoirs, that he "hated Sunday school but got 'hooked' by a letter his pastor Dr. Andy Anderson wrote saying he was writing to forty 'select' men inviting them to what some called the Misfits Class. The word 'select' and the promise of donuts and coffee were what hooked Frank."⁹ Land became president of this pastor's Sunday school class that eventually enrolled 565 persons and had an average attendance of 265.

Frank Land was one of the first laymen to assist in directing Pastor Andy Anderson-developed ACTION campaigns. Additionally, Land helped revise the original Growth Spiral manual with ideas and methods discovered in the field. Frank Land's book gives testimony of his involvement in ACTION Campaigns that took him to many states across the country, where he "has spoken and directed ACTION Enrollment Campaigns in hundreds of churches."¹⁰

Mirian Lopez

Mirian Lopez was a Sunday school teacher since she was 17 years of age, having started teaching children, ages 9-12, in her home church in Cuba. She attended a church, sponsored by Southern Baptist Convention home missionaries, from age four until coming to the United States in 1978. She taught Sunday school every year except for 1978, the year she fled to Miami, and until recently,

taught young adults in Sunday school at her church, the Westland Spanish Baptist Church, Hialeah, where her husband, Angel Lopez Jr., is pastor. Mirian's ministry extended past her local church. She served as a Florida Baptist Assisteam leader for the Hispanic Sunday school team in Miami, and as a national Hispanic Sunday school leader. Professionally, Mirian Lopez worked as the administrative secretary for the Hispanic division of the Miami Baptist Association between 1988 and the early 2000s.

Rudell Martin

Mrs. John (Rudell) Martin was one of the original volunteer Florida Baptist Special Workers, who led in the Sunday school Extension work, and served in that capacity until she moved to Tennessee in the 1990s. Rudell Martin was first listed in the 1953 *Florida Baptist Convention Annual* as the volunteer Extension department superintendent, preceding the designated Special Workers program established in 1971. She served in several churches including First Baptist, Chattahoochee.

Christine McCauley

Chris McCauley served as volunteer Sunday school director for eight years and later as the Education Ministry Team director for the Florida Baptist Association. She also worked directly with various churches' Sunday schools and vacation Bible schools in that assignment. Mrs. McCauley wrote Sunday school curriculum for Preschool, including the "Wee Learn" weekday materials for 4-year-olds. She taught leaders during Sunday school weeks at Ridgecrest most years from 1968-1997, some years at Glorieta, and had a special assignment one year for the Baptist Sunday School Board in Hawaii.

Jessie McCullough

Mrs. Murray (Jessie) McCullough, was a Florida Baptist Special Worker in Sunday school adult work, for many years. Living at Jacksonville Beach, Jessie taught Sunday school at Neptune Baptist Church starting in the early 1970's.

**Her enthusiasm
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attending her
conferences.**

Her enthusiasm alone was enough to motivate Sunday school workers attending her conferences. She was first assigned to teach

young adult leaders for the B.S.S.B. in the early 1970's, although she was in demand to provide training for all adult Sunday school ministries, including median and senior adult leaders.

W. E. (Mac) McCully

W. E. Mac McCully was a volunteer Sunday school director at First Baptist Church, Orlando, from 1970 – 2003. He was known over the state as a gifted Sunday school teacher, and served as a building consultant for the Florida Baptist Sunday School department. A Florida native, Mr. McCully was a contractor who built a number of church buildings over the state. His life was dedicated to helping churches in their building and Sunday school needs.

Mrs. A. K. McLemore

Mrs. A. K. McLemore led her class to be the first Standard Class in First Baptist Church, Chattahoochee, in 1961. What is remarkable about this accomplishment is that Mrs. McLemore was 92 years old and had been teaching adults for 76 years. She began teaching at the age of 16 in Smiths Grove, Kentucky. Mrs. McLemore, who began teaching at First Baptist in 1949, “attended all the study courses offered by the church and received one of the first diplomas given in 1929,” said Mary Leslie Addison. “This teacher so loved by her class that she has stated, ‘With God’s help my class will remain standard.’”¹¹

Mrs. Robert (Doris Bass) McLeod

Doris McLeod, a native of Georgetown, S.C., along with her sister Faye, were active members of the First Baptist Church where their spiritual and social life revolved around the church and its activities. Doris was baptized when she was eight years old. After her family relocated to Orlando in 1964, they joined First Baptist Church, Orlando. Doris and her husband, Bob McLeod, were enlisted to teach/direct the singles group in Sunday school. The McLeods later taught adult classes.

Doris and Bob McLeod moved their membership to College Park Baptist Church in 1980, becoming active in all the programs of that church. By the early 1990's, Doris had been elected to serve as the Sunday school director. Doris, like her sister Faye Parrish, used her experiences to guide and direct the Sunday schools in the churches, by bringing in outside leadership for training the workers.

Lee Noland

Mrs. Robert Noland has been teaching Sunday school since student days at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, where she earned the M.R.E. degree and taught Juniors at Gambrell Street Baptist Church in 1952. She taught Juniors in Sunday school at First Baptist Church, Gulf Breeze, from about 1959 until 1971 when she became Sunday school director, serving until 1991. She then served as director of Teacher Improvement for a few years before again assuming the leadership as Sunday school director.

Mrs. Sidney (Faye Bass) Parrish

Faye Parrish, a native of Georgetown, S.C., along with her sister Doris were active members of First Baptist Church where their spiritual and social life revolved around the church and its activities. Faye was baptized in 1953, although she had accepted Christ several years earlier. After her family relocated to Orlando in 1964, they joined First Baptist Church.

Soon Faye was instrumental in the creation of a singles ministry at the church. Faye, along with other singles, one being her future husband, Sidney Parrish, organized a singles group that met after the evening service on Sunday for fellowship and inspiration. It was not long before this group drew close to 100 singles in the community seeking Christian fellowship. The Parrishes later taught adult classes in First Baptist for many years.

When First Baptist Church moved to a new location in 1986, Sidney and Faye decided to stay at the downtown site, believing strongly in the need for a Baptist church in downtown Orlando. Faye became Sunday school director that year and served for 10 years in that capacity. Faye, like her sister Doris McLeod, used her experiences to guide and direct the Sunday schools in the church by bringing in outside leadership for training the workers, providing strategic planning, and providing motivation for good Sunday school work.

Virginia Rawls

Virginia (Mathis) Rawls served in the Sunday school ministry for over 70 years. She was born outside of Savannah, Georgia, and graduated from high school in January 1933. She moved to Tampa, where her dad, Simpson Simeon Mathis had assumed the pastorate of the Tenth Avenue Baptist Church. She started

working in Sunday school at age 17, right out of high school. She taught in the youth Sunday school class and later taught the Beginner children. By age 18, as a seasoned Sunday school worker, Virginia “graduated” to teaching adults about 1941. She subsequently volunteered to serve in several churches.

Mrs. Rawls was appointed as an original Florida Baptist Approved Worker specializing in Cradle Roll and adults in 1971. She led conferences for secretaries, Cradle Roll, Nursery and adult ministries. Once, while leading the Cradle Roll department of 20 workers at the Ballast Point Baptist Church, Tampa, Mrs. Rawls initiated a “baby hunt.” The effort resulted in the enrollment of 72 babies in one day. Credit for identifying prospects went to a church member, who as a doctor delivering babies, would ask the mothers of the newborns about their church affiliation. Later beginning in 1985, Virginia served as adult teacher and Sunday school director for Temple Terrace’s First Baptist Church.

Mamie Snead

Mrs. Mamie Snead served the Miami Springs (FL.) Baptist Church for 47 years by 1994, teaching the Bible in Sunday school to more than 1,000 first and second graders. On the 45th anniversary of the church, they celebrated by honoring Mamie Snead’s commitment to Sunday school. When asked to teach Sunday school 57 years ago, she admits she didn’t want to do it. She initially refused the offer, but the next day she said she got dressed and headed to the then-mission church, which met in the cafeteria of Miami Springs Elementary school and offered to work as a secretary. “While at the church, a Sunday school teacher announced he couldn’t handle one class for adolescents and smaller children.” Soon Mamie found herself asking herself, “Do you think I could do that?” Her response was positive. “Mamie is one of the bedrocks upon which our Sunday school has founded itself,” said Tex Ziadie, associate pastor and director of the Sunday school. “She is an example of what service is all about.”

One of her hallmark actions was to call by telephone every child the Saturday night before class to remind them to come

One of her hallmark actions was to call by telephone every child the Saturday night before class to remind them to come to church.

to church. As the children entered the classroom, she gave each one a big hug, unless they hugged her first. In 1994, at age 84, it was stated, “she shows no signs of stopping.”¹²

Claude and Lydia Springs

The Springs are notable children’s Sunday school workers in Florida. Claude began teaching young adults at Woodstock Baptist Church in Jacksonville, about 1955. He soon “graduated” to Juniors. He has taught youth, young adults, and college/career students, but always came back to the children’s area. He was a firefighter for the city of Jacksonville for 32 years prior to his retirement and had a special way with little boys, who all wanted to grow up and become firemen.

Lydia Springs, a native of Gainesville, began teaching six-year-old Primaries at Woodstock Baptist Church in Jacksonville in 1954, where her father, O. E. Boals was pastor. She has also taught Intermediates, singles and adults, but always came back to the children’s area. Both Claude and Lydia – who were enlisted as Florida Baptist Special Workers in 1971 – taught Lab School for Children at Ridgecrest Baptist Conference Center for 15 straight years, beginning in 1981.

Lydia became volunteer Sunday school director of the Black Creek Baptist Association in 1972, while she was serving as a minister of education at Jones Road Baptist Church, in Jacksonville. She served the association for about 10 years, then took a short leave and came back to serve for another five years. Lydia also wrote Sunday school curriculum for third and fourth grade children.

Thomas L. Tyson

Thomas L. Tyson was recognized by the National Sunday School Teacher Appreciation Campaign as a top 10 finalist for the Henrietta Mears Sunday School Teacher of the Year Award. “His Sunday school class at East Brent Baptist Church in Pensacola is not like most Sunday School classes.” An article noted, “He teaches classes by conference call at 8:15 and 9:15 a.m. Sunday mornings. The classes have an attendance of 60, not including family members who listen in.” In addition to leading the Sunday school class via telephone, Tyson and his wife, Beth, visit class members on a regular basis to see how they’re doing and to deliver Sunday school material. They also are active in the church’s

homebound ministry, which extends beyond the Sunday school classes via telephone.

East Brent had sponsored a homebound Bible study via telephone for 17 years according to an undated article in the *Florida Baptist Witness*. Everyone had a speaker on their phone that the church provided and were able to communicate with each other, though with 60 plus in attendance, “it can get kind of crowded, speaking wise,” Tyson said. Thomas Tyson’s watchword: “My passion and vision is to reach as many people as possible through the Sunday school.”¹³

H. E. Wilkes

Brother H. E. Wilkes was a seasoned Sunday school teacher. An article in the *Florida Baptist Witness* on December 2, 1954, reported, “H. E. Wilkes honored as he begins 71st year as Sunday school teacher.” “He has taught Sunday school for 70 years and is still going strong.” The article further reported, “At 86 he had no plans to retire. His church, the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, in St. Petersburg, held a special program to launch his 71st year as a teacher. He began teaching in Dalton, Georgia in November 1883 when he was 16 years old. He came to St. Petersburg some 30 years ago. The octogenarian was a Greek, Hebrew and Latin scholar.”¹⁴

ENDNOTES:

[Editor’s Note: These profiles were drawn from an edited rendition of L. David Cunningham’s *A History of Florida Baptists’ Sunday Schools: Facts, Stories, Legends and Dreams*, published in 2005 by Xulon Press.]

¹ L. David Cunningham, *A History of Florida Baptists’ Sunday Schools: Facts, Stories, Legends and Dreams*, (Maitland, FL.: Xulon Press, 2005), 105.

² *Florida Baptist Witness*, January 1, 1981, 3.

³ *Ibid.*, April 5, 1973, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, April 28, 1955, 10.

⁵ Keila Diaz, “Georgina Figueroa – A 70-year Legacy of Sunday School Ministry in Cuba and Florida,” *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, (2022), 96-105.

⁶ *Ibid.*, October 21, 1999, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, September 20, 2004, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, August 23, 1945, 12.

⁹ Frank E. Land, *How I Enrolled 250,000 in Bible Study*, (Fort Myers, FL: Christ for the World Book Publishers, 1984) 28-29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, VI-VII.

¹¹ *Florida Baptist Witness*, August 3, 1961, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*, May 19, 1994, 3.

¹³ *Ibid.*, unknown publication date.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, December 2, 1954, np.

Andy Anderson's Sunday School ACTION Growth Plan Was Developed and Nurtured In a Florida Church

*by Donald S. Hepburn
Managing Director
Florida Baptist
Historical Society*



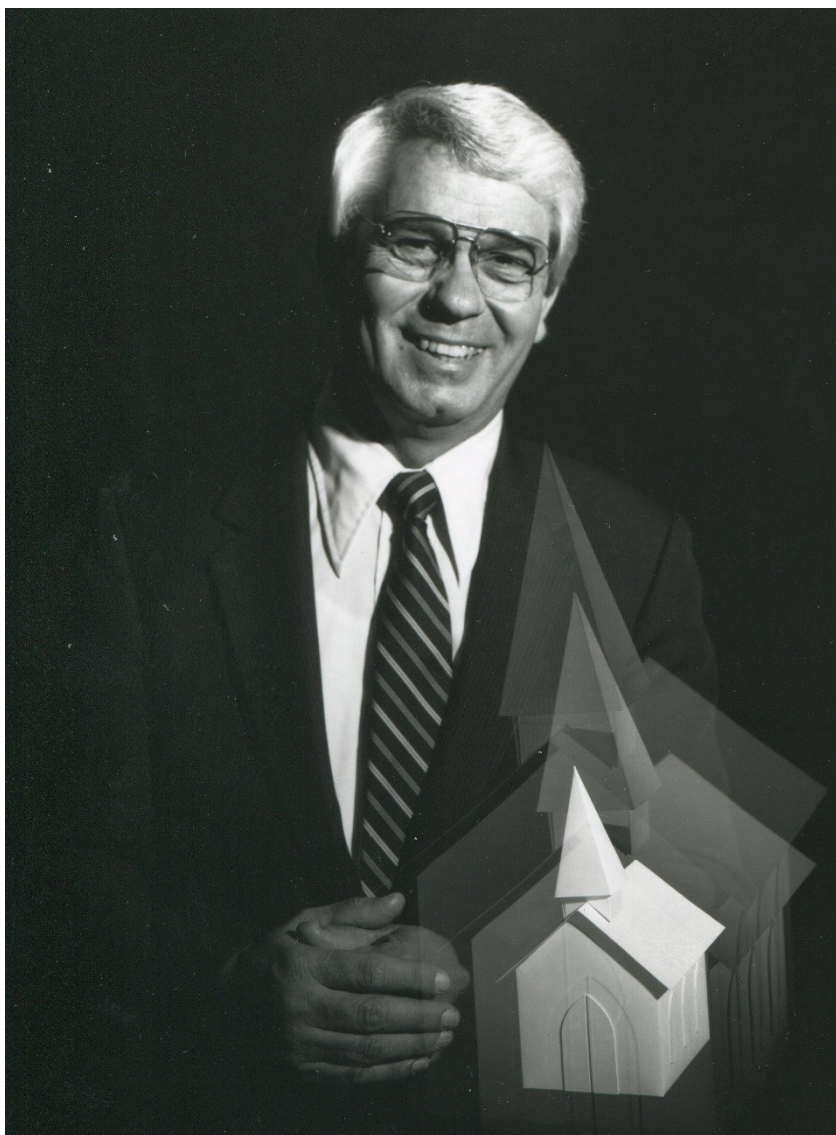
Ellett Sherrill "Andy" Anderson was a typical Florida Baptist pastor who had a passionate desire to win people to faith in Jesus Christ as a means to grow his church. "I became a student of church growth in 1946 at the age of nineteen when I accepted my first pastorate," Anderson recalled in his book on church growth.¹

That burning desire and commitment resulted in Anderson developing a church growth plan called ACTION, a Sunday school enrollment plan. That strategy served as the foundation for the subsequent accelerated Sunday school "Growth Spiral" and the "Super Spiral." These three strategies – based upon the concept of enrolling anybody, anywhere, anytime, anyhow in a local church's Sunday school – became a church growth strategy embraced by Southern Baptists from the mid-1970s into the 1980s.²

However, before ACTION became a phenomenon in Southern Baptist life, the enrollment concept was developed and refined in the Riverside Baptist Church, Fort Myers, where Anderson served as pastor from 1956 to 1975.

Spiritual Development in South Carolina

Ellett Sherrill "Andy" Anderson (b. 1927; d. 2001), a native of Cheraw, South Carolina, was the son of Stanley and Lillian Anderson. Andy was number five in a line of seven sons, although three died in infancy.³ His childhood was typical for a child growing up in a rural area of the Palmetto state.



E. S. "Andy" Anderson

His parents were committed Baptists who were active in the local Baptist church, which likely played a significant role in the spiritual development of the young Anderson.

A notable event occurred in 1938 in Cheraw, when town leaders prayed for and readied for a great revival. To facilitate their spiritual expectations, the Christian Businessmen's Association constructed a wooden tabernacle with a sawdust floor designed to seat 1000 people. "Months of prayer and preparation preceded the coming of evangelist Jimmy Johnson from North Carolina," Anderson later wrote.⁴ "The stored-up prayers of the people of the community were unleashed. . . [and] during the month-long revival meeting over one thousand made first-time decisions," he recalled.⁵

It was during the revival that the 11-year-old Andy Anderson responded to the invitation for salvation. He soon learned that his mother had spent that particular evening in the tabernacle's semi-dark side room – during the music and preaching – praying for the salvation of Andy.⁶ Even before the revival, Lillian Anderson had been cultivating Andy's spiritual development and praying for him. He told of how his mother taught the Bible to he and his brothers. "Before I entered the first grade, she saw that I 'hid the Word in my heart,' by memorizing over two hundred verses."⁷ Upon his profession of faith, Andy was baptized in the First Baptist Church, Cheraw.⁸

“Without this back injury, I would have continued to run from the Lord,”

Sometime before attending high school Anderson experienced a call into full-time Christian ministry, although he did not yet know the specific ministry. That calling was clarified during

his senior year in high school, while playing football, he suffered a severe back injury that required fusion surgery. "Without this back injury, I would have continued to run

from the Lord,” by pursuing a career as a professional baseball pitcher, Anderson wrote.⁹

Early Ministry Service

Once focused on preparing for the ministry, Anderson and his childhood sweetheart – Eleanor Haley (b. 1925) – eloped to get married, as soon as Anderson graduated from high school in 1944– he was 17 and she was 15.¹⁰ To fulfill that call to ministry, Anderson enrolled in the Atlanta Bible Institute from which he graduated in 1947, having earned a bachelor of divinity degree. In that same year – at age 20 – he was ordained to the pastoral ministry by the Northside Park Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia.

He was called to serve as pastor of the West Bainbridge Baptist Church in rural Georgia. He subsequently was enlisted to serve as superintendent of missions in Georgia’s Bowen Baptist Association. That service was followed by a brief pastorate in Meigs, Georgia.¹¹ Then Anderson was called to serve the First Baptist Church of Wildwood, Florida, where he served from 1952 to 1956. While continuing to serve churches, Anderson enrolled in the extension program of Luther Rice Seminary, Jacksonville, Florida, to pursue a master of theology and subsequently a doctor of ministry degrees.¹²

Riverside Baptist Church, Fort Myers

In 1956, the membership of the fifty-year-old Riverside Baptist Church, Fort Myers, accepted the recommendation of its pastor search committee to call as its pastor the 29-year-old, six-foot tall and lanky young man named Andy Anderson. Unfortunately, the Sunday evening of his introductory sermon, “the entire experience proved to be completely miserable, . . . Nothing seemed to go right,” Anderson later recalled. He concluded the next morning, “I vowed never to come back to the place again.”¹³

At the encouragement of his wife Eleanor and several church leaders, Anderson agreed to pray about his decision on

accepting the call to serve as pastor. Andy and his wife prayed about the decision for the next seven days. “The result was that God completely turned us around. We accepted the call to come to Riverside,” Anderson wrote.¹⁴ The church welcomed Andy and Eleanor and their family of two daughters – Mary Anne and Sonya Lyn – and a son Ronald. A church history later characterized Andy Anderson as having “a gentle demeanor and affection for people.”¹⁵

Initial Steps into Church Growth

When Anderson accepted the call to lead the Riverside Church, it had a resident membership of 599. But Anderson believed much more could be done in reaching the spiritually lost in the Fort Myers area which, like most communities along Florida's southwest gulf coast, was primarily a tourist mecca in the winter months. The population of Lee County was approximately 50,000, which included Fort Myers' 30,000 residents.

Andy Anderson was a firm believer in growing a church through the Sunday school. It was his firm conviction that, “The objective of the Sunday school is reaching lost people for Jesus Christ and meaningful church membership,” he

believed. “These two go together. The purpose of the church is not only reaching lost people for Jesus Christ, but also reaching them for meaningful church membership which includes discipleship and service.”¹⁶ To make Sunday school outreach effective, Anderson also stressed the view that “Sunday school teachers must be willing to seek and to rely upon the leadership of the Holy Spirit. The teacher's responsibility is to expose the unregenerate person to the Bible, then allow God to perform the miracle of salvation.”¹⁷

“The objective of the Sunday school is reaching lost people for Jesus Christ and meaningful church membership”

However, Anderson recognized that in order to get people in front of his Sunday school teachers would require two

deliberate actions: evangelism and visitation. These actions became a trial-and-error process at Riverside. Initially Anderson trained the church's deacons and other leaders to engage in regularly scheduled visits with prospects to share the plan of salvation. And while a significant number of professions of faith were registered, most of those persons did not follow through to baptism and joining the church. Taking a six-month pause in evangelism outreach, Anderson evaluated the whole evangelism process. The re-formatted outreach effort emphasized every Sunday night training in evangelism for Sunday school teachers and having those teachers do prospect visitation every Monday night. "When we channeled our evangelism efforts through the Sunday school, we began baptizing 94 percent of the persons led to the Lord instead of the earlier 18 percent," led by the deacons, Anderson wrote.¹⁸

**"Our task is not to
make Baptists.
It is to teach the
Scriptures."**

Although a strong advocate of the role of Sunday school, Andy Anderson also recognized that "there are persons in every community who will never be reached for Christ through

efforts to involve them in a regular, ongoing Sunday school class."¹⁹ As a result Anderson decided to organize and host a weekly non-denominational pastor's Bible study class. To enlist people to attend, Andy Anderson got a local telephone directory, and starting at the letter "A," began making cold calls inviting persons to attend his class. The hard work and persistence resulted in people coming to the class. He recalled that among the several hundred persons attending each week he had as many as 14 different denominations represented in his class. To his distractors, Anderson reminded them, "Our task is not to make Baptists. It is to teach the Scriptures." Continuing, he said, "When this is done, the Holy Spirit convicts, converts and places in our churches those whom He chooses to place there."²⁰

Early in his ministry at Riverside, Anderson sought other ways to share the gospel with the Fort Myers community, which also helped to enhance the identity of the church within the community. These efforts included the establishment of a radio station that broadcast eighteen hours-a-day all Christian programming. And during 16-years from the 1960s to the early 1970s, he led the church to purchase television air-time on Sunday mornings to broadcast the worship service live over WINK-TV.²¹

The effectiveness of Anderson's strategy was reflected in the Riverside Church's statistical record during his first six years of leadership. Between 1956 and 1962: Sunday school enrollment grew from 847 to 1286; church membership grew from 823 to 1454; and baptisms averaged 111 per year. In the next six years – 1963 to 1968 – the statistics reflected: Sunday school enrollment dropped from 1286 to 1217; church membership grew from 1454 to 1600; and baptisms averaged 93 per year.²²

Accident Caused a Spiritual Reassessment

As noted previously, while in high school Anderson sustained a severe back injury that resulted in Andy Anderson finally responding to God's call to ministry. Another accident, 24 years later in 1968, also caused Anderson to re-examine his life's direction and God's desire for his life. He recalled the latest life-changing event as follows:

“As I returned from a mission church meeting with three deacons, about 11 o'clock one night a tractor-trailer ran into our car from the rear. It seemed to climb into the back seat where I was seated. My right shoulder was crushed totally; my right leg also was smashed from the hip to the knee. Doctors told me I probably never would be able to use the arm again, but I would be able to walk. This accident kept me in the hospital for the larger part of two years. During that time, I could do nothing but pray and study my Bible.”²³

Although full recovery from the accident finally came, Anderson said the recovery was so complete he was able to use his right arm with ease and walk without a limp. And yet there were several positive outcomes from that period of extended recuperation. One was his development of a “Bible study kit that taught students how to read Greek, as a mail-in course. Later the study was used at Dallas Bible College in Texas and the Hong Kong Baptist Bible Institute.”²⁴

**The second
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renewal process.**

The second more important development was Anderson’s personal spiritual renewal process. Anderson recalled that “during the period of my convalescence I spent one to two hours in devotional life each day, not in sermon preparation, but in Bible study for personal

growth and in prayer, praying especially for the members of my church.” Another outcome, according to Anderson was, “During my convalescence God led the church. It did not go backward but continued to increase in size and spirit.”²⁵

However, once Anderson returned to the pulpit it seemed growth of the church became stagnant. He readily observed that Fort Myers and Lee County were experiencing significant population growth, yet the church was not reaching with the gospel these new residents. “My concern over our church’s lack of growth amid an ever-growing mass of people unreached for Bible study and for Christ became increasingly serious in my life,” Anderson observed.²⁶ The pastor shared his spiritual burden with the congregation which responded positively. As a result, each Wednesday night prayer service was devoted to prayer and seeking God’s guidance for reaching the spiritually lost.

Evolving a Growth Plan Called ACTION

“Out of this concern,” Anderson often told others, “ACTION was born. God gave it to us through the leadership of the

Holy Spirit, but our concern softened our hearts and tuned our spiritual ears.”²⁷ That movement of God reinforced the emphasis upon reaching people through the Sunday school.

What had been tried-and-true Sunday school growth efforts used by Pastor Anderson in other churches gained a fresh perspective. Primarily, those efforts had been based upon the “The Flake Formula for Sunday School Growth” which promoted “five simple ideas: locate the prospects, enlarge the organization, enlist and train the workers, provide the space, and go after the people,” he explained.²⁸

Anderson readily admitted that his ACTION enrollment program was not designed “to replace the Flake Formula or the laws of Sunday school growth.” He further stressed to anyone who would listen, that “ACTION is not another gimmick. It is a program that is based upon the very heartbeat of Sunday school growth. It is a Bible-based program of outreach. It is a plan to achieve permanent growth.”²⁹ But what ACTION did offer was an “open enrollment concept that taught, enroll anyone, anytime, anywhere they are willing, to become a part of your Sunday school.”³⁰ This startling, yet simple approach, was in response to the “restrictive” enrollment that Anderson noted was occurring in the Riverside Church’s Sunday school ministry. He said a visitor to a Sunday school class had to return three or more times – if ever – before they would be officially enrolled.³¹

“Open enrollment helps churches reach people. The Flake Formula helps Sunday school grow,” Anderson reaffirmed in his writing. “Therefore . . . God led me to marry the open enrollment concept to the Flake Formula. The result, over a nine-month period of prayer and fasting, was the Sunday School Growth Spiral.”³²

**God led me to
marry the open
enrollment
concept to the
Flake Formula.**

During Anderson's final six years (1969 – 1975) at Riverside Church: Sunday school enrollment grew from 1217 to 2242; church membership grew from 1600 to 2022; and baptisms averaged 123 per year.³³

ACTION Plan Goes Across Florida and Nation

As word spread of the success of the ACTION plan in the Riverside Church, Anderson in the summer of 1975, discussed with the Florida Baptist Convention's Sunday School department director James Frost, about the ACTION enrollment plan. In an agreement between Anderson, Frost, and the Florida Baptist Convention's Executive Secretary-Treasurer Harold Bennett, scheduling was developed for Anderson to present and interpret the ACTION plan to leaders in all Florida's Baptist associations.³⁴

Subsequently, "A. V. Washburn, Sunday School director for the Baptist Sunday School Board liked what he saw in ACTION" and offered Anderson the position of director of Sunday School Enrollment. In a unique arrangement the Board allowed Anderson to retain his home in Fort Myers and from there, Anderson travelled across the country to fulfill his job responsibilities of promoting, interpreting and training in the ACTION plan.³⁵

As the Baptist Sunday School Board began promotion of what they called "ACTION: A Reach Out Enrollment Plan for Sunday School," initial acceptance was reported to be good. The Board reported in 1976: "We are enthusiastic about its prospects for increased numbers of people in Bible study."³⁶ The following year the Board report noted, "During the year, 6,400 churches secured the ACTION materials for use in Sunday school enrollment and 1,666 churches reported having conducted one or more ACTION campaigns."³⁷

By 1980, increased positive reports about the effectiveness of the ACTION enrollment plan were cited. Across the nation, the Board held 118 meetings to interpret and train church leadership in the use the ACTION plan – many led by Andy

Anderson – that resulted in “a goal of establishing 3,000 new Sunday schools in three years had been exceeded.”³⁸

Subsequently, the Board's 1982 report summed up the effectiveness of the growth campaign by proudly announcing, “This brings to 5,000 the new Sunday schools begun since 1976.”³⁹

**“This brings to
5,000 the new
Sunday schools
begun since 1976.”**

In the ensuing years, the Board continued to make positive statistical reports on the use of the ACTION plan and its enhanced variations for accelerated growth – the Growth Spiral and the Super Growth Spiral – being used by churches and Baptist associations.

“As with any process,” observed former Florida Baptist Sunday School department director David Cunningham, “there are good and bad points.” The good aspect was that the ACTION plan and the subsequent Growth Spiral “provided a process for predictable growth.” The flip side, were “the hundreds of pastors who, after attending a growth spiral clinic or conference, went home and announced to their church that they were now ‘on the growth spiral.’ Then nothing happened. They failed to work the process.”⁴⁰

However, by 1985, the Baptist Sunday School Board was no longer promoting the ACTION enrollment plan. As a part of the Southern Baptist Convention's Bold Mission Thrust emphasis, the Board began promoting Challenge 10/90 as a “new” Sunday school enrollment emphasis for the years 1985 to 1990. Despite the change in enrollment plans promoted by the Board, the Andy Anderson ACTION enrollment plan remained popular. A contemporary search (2022) of the Internet, using the terms “Andy Anderson,” “Action enrollment,” or “Growth spiral,” will yield hundreds of Anderson resources available for sale, as well as non-Baptist evangelical church leaders extolling the value, virtues and

effectiveness of the enrollment plan as a means to grow a church.

Even with the reduced promotion of the ACTION plan, Anderson continued to serve as a church growth consultant until 1992 when he retired from service with the Baptist Sunday School Board. During his ministry he had written eight books, including a guide to fasting. The spiritual matters of prayer and fasting became a personal passion for Anderson. Begun in 1976 the spiritual renewal process was the topic of presentations he continued to make into retirement.⁴¹ Anderson continued to live in Fort Myers and joined the Southwest Baptist Church.

“He was an awesome guy,” said Frank Land, who as a layman served alongside Andy Anderson in the Riverside Church as a volunteer worker promoting the initial ACTION enrollment plan. “He had no airs about him. Everybody loved him,” Land said of Anderson following his death.⁴²

E. S. “Andy” Anderson died October 31, 2001, at age 74, in Fort Myers. He had been in a coma since suffering a cerebral hemorrhage May 15.⁴³

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- ⁴¹ See Andy Anderson's, *Fasting Changed My Life*, previously cited, wherein he chronicles his prayer and fasting experiences.
- ⁴² Liza Torres, 14; also see L. David Cunningham's previously cited book, 134-135, description of Frank Land's extensive involvement in the promotion of the Andy Anderson ACTION plan.
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You can create a personal, God-honoring Legacy by contributing to the Florida Baptist Historical Society endowment fund that will support the future on-going mission and ministries of the Society. Society ministries include researching, collecting, preserving, and publishing Florida Southern Baptist historical materials. The Society assists local churches in preserving their respective Legacy by offering assistance in research, writing and publication of local church documentaries and histories. Gifts to this fund are tax deductible and all checks may be made out to the Florida Baptist Historical Society Endowment Fund. Mail to: Florida Baptist Historical Society, PO Box 95, Graceville, FL 32440.

Florida Baptist Historical Society

PO Box 95
Graceville, FL 32440
850-360-4179
www.FloridaBaptistHistory.org
Society2@FloridaBaptistHistory.org
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The Role and Importance of the Sunday School Ministry Today

by Ken Braddy, D.Ed.Min.
Director, Sunday School and
Network Partnerships
Lifeway Christian Resources
Nashville, Tennessee



The word vital is defined as “of the utmost importance, fundamentally concerned with or affecting life or living beings.”¹ As applied to the ministry of Sunday school, the definition fits perfectly. Sunday school is of the utmost importance to the church today, and it is fundamentally concerned with affecting the life of its members and guests for Christ. The ministry of Sunday school was transplanted from England to the early American colonies in the mid-1600s, being “Americanized” as the country moved westward. Sunday school became a response to the Great Commission’s command to make disciples, which includes both evangelism and biblical instruction. Sunday school was vital over three hundred years ago, and it is still vital today. Thom Rainer, a self-described Sunday school skeptic at one point, said, “Any lingering doubts I had about Sunday school were erased when my research team and I . . . conducted a survey of 576 churches in America. I learned once again that the leading churches in our nation value the Sunday school in growing a church and assimilating members.”²

Sunday school may be defined as follows: *Sunday school is the church’s foundational discipleship strategy for people of all ages where they learn to think and act like Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit.* Sunday school must be accessible for spiritually lost persons while simultaneously meeting the needs of growing believers.

Disciples learn in rows but grow in circles. This acknowledges the importance of a small-group strategy for growing believers as disciples beyond what they learn and



experience in a worship service. “Preaching to make disciples is like going to the nursery and spraying crying babies with milk and saying you just fed the kids . . . discipleship involves more than preaching and listening.”³ Southern Baptists have long been known as people of the

Word, and they also have been known for their strong commitment to teaching the Bible in small groups through the ministry of Sunday school.

Is Sunday School Still Needed Today?

David Francis, a former director of Sunday School at Lifeway Christian Resources, explored the research conducted for the

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book *Transformational Groups*. The original research began with a survey of 7,000 Protestant pastors, included interviews with 250 churches, plus surveys of 15,000 church members. Francis identified the percentage of transformational churches that used Sunday school as

their primary discipleship strategy. The results were impressive: 87.8 percent of churches that were identified as transformational employed Sunday school as their foundational discipleship strategy. This demonstrates that Sunday school continues to be a strong foundational approach for making disciples. Sunday school is needed today because it creates a place for several crucial things to happen that are important in the process of making disciples.

A Place for Connection and Community

Throughout the book of Acts, the first-century church disciplined Christians in two primary places. The philosophy seen in Acts also is the basis for the philosophy of groups today. Throughout Acts, people gathered in two primary places. The church grew exponentially at this time, and first-century believers came together in the temple courts to worship Jesus and hear the Word of God spoken and applied to them by the apostles. This is the first of the two kinds of gatherings seen in Acts.

The second kind of gathering took place in the homes of Christians. There is a glimpse of group life in Acts 2:42-47. It was in these smaller circles that believers enjoyed times of prayer, fellowship, ministry, service, and growth. Thousands of new believers were assimilated into the church through small groups. Today, the majority of Southern Baptist churches use a similar philosophy: large-group worship and a small-group strategy called Sunday school.

Christians today need connection and community like their first-century counterparts. Author Carey Nieuwhof has proposed that community and connection will be more important than the content delivered in group Bible study.

“Growing churches . . . will realize that connection and community will win out over content in the end, and they will focus their resources there. Nobody should be able to out-local or out-community the local church. Absolutely produce the best content you can, but make the goal connecting with people. When you provide connection (getting to know people, moving them into community, caring for them), it will provide a loyalty and sense of tribe that people can’t get elsewhere.”⁴

A Place for Spiritual Transformation

The practice of meeting together in smaller groups has changed since the first century, but the goal is similar to what took place in Jerusalem as the earliest believers met together in small groups. Today people connect to one another relationally in groups. Praying together, serving together, learning together, and giving from an overflow of their financial resources are common practices of growing disciples. These outcomes, seen in Acts 2:42-47, can be found in healthy groups today.

The data mined from the Transformational Group research project conducted by Lifeway Research and the executive director, Scott McConnell, reinforced the belief that groups matter – a lot. The research surveyed 2,930 American adults

who attended a Protestant church at least once a month. Within the research project, the Lifeway team learned a tremendous amount about the importance of groups to the success of a church as it seeks to make disciples. Is Sunday school relevant? Do groups truly matter? The answer according to the research is a resounding yes.

The Transformational Group research project uncovered eight ways in which people grow as disciples. These eight attributes can be seen in the lives of people who are on a pathway of discipleship and growth. Being involved in a Bible study group accelerated the people's spiritual growth in every way. The eight attributes of discipleship are:

Being involved in a Bible study group accelerated the people's spiritual growth in every way.

- Bible engagement;
- Obeying God and denying self;
- Serving God and others;
- Sharing Christ;
- Exercising faith;
- Seeking God;
- Building relationships; and
- Living unashamed⁵

The research was compelling because it demonstrated how regular involvement in a group accelerates a believer's growth as a disciple.⁶

Question	Did not attend a group	Attended a group 4+ times a month
I intentionally spend time with other believers in order to help them grow in their faith	22%	63%

I have developed significant relationships with people at my church	57%	89%
I am intentionally putting my spiritual gift(s) to use serving God and others	42%	73%
I intentionally try to get to know new people I meet at church	37%	67%
Throughout the day I find myself thinking about biblical truths	45%	74%
Spiritual matters do not tend to come up as a normal part of my daily conversations with other Christians	38%	19%
If a person is sincerely seeking God, he/she can obtain eternal life through religions other than Christianity	33%	18%

The authors of the book *Transformational Groups* noted other ways in which involvement in a group is advantageous for a believer. The research demonstrated that people in groups give financially at a higher level than those not in groups, they share their faith more frequently, they confess sin more frequently, they serve to a greater degree than people not in groups, and they are more likely to stay with the church over time more than people who have not connected with a group of their own. The authors noted that, “One thing is definitely clear: Those who attend groups act and think differently from those who do not. We passionately believe that engaging in small groups . . . promotes and even causes such greater involvement and activity. That’s been our experience . . .”⁷

A Place for Assimilation

Sunday school is also important to churches that have declined or plateaued because a renewed focus on group

ministry led to significant recovery and revitalization. In the book *Comeback Churches*, authors Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, noted that comeback churches began to grow again as they emphasized the importance of building community through groups (Sunday school or small groups). “An increased emphasis in Sunday school and increased teacher training were important factors in their comeback experience.”⁸

Thom Rainer, a former Lifeway president, spoke to the power of Sunday school’s ability to connect people relationally and create community in his book *High Expectations*. “After nearly a decade of researching two thousand churches of different sizes, locations, and denominations, I cannot say that I am surprised that Sunday school was rated so highly as an assimilation tool.”⁹ There is power in group ministry, which is the power of connection and relationships. Why is Sunday school so vital and important today? The answer is that people are created for relationship (Genesis 2:18). Churches that emphasize connection in groups, and not just the delivery of content in groups, position themselves to have a powerful ministry. In another research project, Dr. Rainer learned that if people are not connected to a Bible study group and choose to attend worship only, in five years only 16 percent of new members can be found. Conversely, if new people join the church and commit to attend a group regularly, 83 percent are still connected to the church at the end of the same five-year period.¹⁰

A Place for Biblical Instruction

Sunday school provides ongoing groups for people of all ages. Groups for people “from birth to heaven” can be found

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discipleship**

in most churches, making Sunday school an attractive place for families to receive biblical instruction while on the church campus. Age-graded classes for kids,

students, and adults are common, as are lifestyle or affinity-based groups for adults.

Sunday school engages people in foundational discipleship, and as such it is a place where biblical illiteracy is combatted. Americans struggle to read their Bibles regularly. “Just over one-third of U.S. adults (34 percent) reads the Bible once a week or more, while half (50 percent) read the Bible less than twice a year (including “never”). In between these two extremes, we find those who read the Bible more than twice a year, but not on a weekly basis (16 percent). Overall, one in six U.S. adults (16 percent) reads the Bible most days during the week . . .”¹¹

Southern Baptists Embraced the Sunday School Movement

As Sunday school evolved during the early nineteenth century, the American version expanded its mission beyond the social gospel emphasis of the British model from which it came. “Sunday school became an evangelical enterprise . . .

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of Sunday school.**

Sunday school was embraced by many churches relatively early – especially evangelical churches.”¹² Southern Baptists were among groups of evangelicals that embraced and endorsed the ministry of Sunday school.

From 1917 through 1919, the worldwide Spanish Flu pandemic raged. “An estimated 500 million people were infected worldwide (around one third of the world’s population) and 50 – 100 million people died (three to five percent of the global population).”¹³ In the aftermath of this terrible pandemic, the Baptist Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention embraced Sunday school as a discipleship strategy and enlisted a man to become the first

secretary of the new Sunday school administration department. This man's important work was to help Southern Baptist churches strengthen Sunday schools and reach people for Christ. This man's name was Arthur Flake (b. 1862; d. 1953), the father of the modern Southern Baptist Sunday school movement. Through his eighteen books and constant championing of Sunday school growth principles and best practices, Flake helped usher in a period of church growth during the Roaring Twenties and beyond. An entire department rose up under Flake's leadership, one that had the assignment of training and strengthening the Sunday schools of Southern Baptist churches. "At the age of fifty-eight, he began his most enduring work. In the field . . . he tested and refined his technique for building a Sunday school. Now he summarized them in five simple points that became famous as 'Flake's Formula.'"¹⁴ After only four years of Flake's leadership at the Baptist Sunday School Board, Sunday school enrollment was up by 600,000 people. Literature purchase receipts at the Board more than doubled from \$634,000 in 1919 to \$1.42 million by 1924.

Following Flake's tenure at the Baptist Sunday School Board, other men followed in his steps and continued to write, train, speak, and encourage churches to utilize Sunday school as their primary approach to making disciples. B. W. Spillman, David Francis, Bill Taylor, Harry Piland, and others, dating back to the time of Arthur Flake, have all championed the growth of Southern Baptist churches through the ministry of Sunday school.

Southern Baptists continued to embrace Sunday school when they came into possession of two conference centers, one at Ridgecrest, N.C., and the other in Glorieta, N.M. "As Glorieta developed over the years, it became the third largest tourist destination in the state, with a picturesque lake, beautiful buildings, and gardens laid out over eight acres..."¹⁵ These two places became training centers for Southern Baptist pastors and lay Sunday school leaders for decades.

Tens of thousands of men and women experienced Sunday school training at these conference centers.

The Baptist Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention (now known as Lifeway Christian Resources) continued to embrace Sunday school by publishing dozens of books to train Sunday school leaders. Study course books familiarized lay leaders with best practices for Sunday school groups, and informed them about the characteristics of the children, students, and adults whom they taught. During David Francis' tenure as the director of Sunday school, he authored annual Sunday school support books, including conference training plans to help churches teach the content to their Sunday school leaders. More recently, books such as *Breathing Life into Sunday School* and *Breakthrough: Creating a New Scorecard for Group Ministry Success* continue to promote best practices in Sunday school ministry.

Southern Baptist churches also embraced Sunday school through the curriculum developed at the Baptist Sunday School Board. Developed in agreement with the S.B.C.'s *Baptist Faith and Message* statement, curriculum from the Baptist Sunday School Board provided churches with trustworthy content for people of all ages.

Changing Methodologies

Sunday school methodologies have undergone numerous changes over the last two centuries. Sunday schools across the country have continued to adjust and adapt to changing conditions in both the church and in the culture. Some of the changes are seen most notably in the following areas:

Training – In the past, Sunday school training was often conducted weekly as a

Sunday school methodologies have undergone numerous changes over the last two centuries.

way to prepare group leaders to teach on the following Sunday. Training took place on Sunday or Wednesday evenings, and it was conducted at the church campus. Over the last two centuries, the training of workers has changed and become less frequent. Today, it is not unusual for churches to provide training monthly, quarterly, annually, or never.

Location— The majority of churches conducted Sunday school at the church campus and on Sunday mornings between the hours of 9 A.M. to 11 A.M. Today, churches have shifted their campus-centric philosophy to offer classes at times other than Sunday mornings, and in locations besides the church campus. In addition to meeting off-campus and on days other than Sunday, groups have learned to move their location online.

Purpose— Sunday school has historically been considered the outreach arm of the church. People like Arthur Flake promoted the idea that evangelism was the primary purpose of Sunday school when he said, “The supreme business of Christianity is to win the lost to Christ. This is what churches are for. It was Christ’s supreme mission . . . surely then the Sunday school must relate itself to the winning of the lost to Christ as an ultimate objective.”¹⁶ Today the evangelistic purpose of groups has given way to an emphasis on discipleship. The goal of many groups is to go deeper in their understanding of Scripture, which often diminishes the outward focus of the group that was so prevalent in the last century.

Curriculum - A shift has occurred in groups today with regard to the curriculum used by groups. In the past a denominational publisher was the primary source of curriculum for groups. The Baptist Sunday School Board (Lifeway Christian Resources today) supplied Southern Baptist churches with curriculum for all age groups in the past. Today, group leaders who write their own studies, or churches that create sermon-based curriculum, are

becoming more prevalent. There is less loyalty to denominational publishers such as Lifeway as new options are discovered.

Children's Sunday school – Over the past two hundred years, foundational discipleship for children has been conducted through small Sunday school groups. Children have been placed in Bible study groups based on age or school grade with appropriate student-teacher ratios. In those groups, teachers have led children to explore the Bible and apply it to life. Because of the small nature of these groups, teachers developed relationships with children and their parents. Today, however, a shift has occurred in many churches. Volunteer recruitment is more challenging today, and churches often struggle to recruit leaders who will teach for an entire Sunday school year. Today, churches have tried creatively staffing their classrooms with adults who serve for one week at a time, or one month at a time.

Conclusion

Sunday school still works today, but it must be worked.

Just because a church has a ministry called Sunday school does not automatically guarantee that it is a relevant, growing, thriving ministry. It can be, but it requires cultivation, nourishment, attention, and constant maintenance. Churches that are committed to have healthy Sunday school ministries

have experienced the proportionate blessings. If churches have not poured time, money, resources, and attention into Sunday

Sunday school still works today, but it must be worked.

school, it is no wonder they have decided that it is no longer relevant or needed today. Congregations that are committed to Sunday school believe it is a necessary disciple-making ministry.

ENDNOTES:

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vital>

² Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 31.

³ Robby Gallaty, *Growing Up*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Books, 2013), 25.

⁴ <https://careynieuwhof.com/8-disruptive-church-trends-that-will-rule-2021-the-rise-of-the-post-pandemic-church/>

⁵ Ed Stetzer and Eric Geiger, *Transformational Groups*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishing, 2014), 39.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41

⁷ *Ibid.*, 44

⁸ Ed Stetzer and Mike Dodson, *Comeback Churches*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Books, 2007), 146.

⁹ Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1999), 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/sotb-2021/>

¹² David Francis, *Missionary Sunday School*, (Nashville, TN: Lifeway Press, 2011), 11.

¹³ <https://www.thehistorypress.co.uk/articles/the-spanish-flu-pandemic-of-1918/>

¹⁴ James T. Draper, *Lifeway Legacy* (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Books, 2006), 148.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 213

¹⁶ Arthur Flake, *Building a Standard Sunday School*, (Nashville, TN: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention), 98.

Serving Churches

OUR MISSION:

In fulfilment of our Mission to research, preserve and promote the Legacy of Florida Baptists, the Society assists leadership of Florida Baptist churches and associations in a variety of ways:

- the research of local church and association histories;
- the research of pastoral leader biography;
- provide resources for publishing a history; and
- encourage and assist churches and associations to celebrate their respective heritage and anniversaries.



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The Florida Baptist Historical Society is a Cooperative Program ministry of the Florida Baptist Convention

Appendix
Florida Baptists' 133-Years Enrollment Records 1882 - 2015
 [Highlighted in 5-year Intervals]

Year	Churches	Total Members	Sunday School Enrollment	V.B.S. Enrollment
1882	222	8,059	1,010	N/A
1890	173	7,384	3,686	N/A
1899	459	22,620	10,474	N/A
1906	519	27,969	12,600	N/A
1910	598	39,017	19,577	N/A
1915	730	54,951	35,058	N/A
1920	751	65,094	38,114	N/A
1925	838	99,075	80,240	2,486
1930	751	115,705	82,665	1,465
1935	835	132,544	94,678	2,990
1940	808	162,396	117,343	16,585
1945	833	199,483	130,271	N/A
1950	911	278,668	214,402	74,802
1955	1,066	371,807	319,533	115,479
1960	1,257	480,407	397,771	145,562
1965	1,384	570,614	431,667	158,509
1970	1,448	647,239	409,112	163,818
1975	1,499	736,531	446,879	181,054
1980	1,550	799,803	446,513	170,154
1985	1,916	874,540	503,753	181,519
1990	2,094	952,273	542,547	188,498
1995	2,345	1,006,598	583,609	171,894
2000	2,609	1,054,906	596,482	168,008
2005	2,744	1,044,831	579,863	181,324
2010	2,931	1,006,582	548,041	178,971
2015	2,540	847,082	465,853	135,105

NOTES:

1 — The year 1882 report represents the first year the Florida Baptist Convention began collecting statistical information from the cooperating Baptist associations that were collecting statistical information from their respective member churches.

2 — Since 1844, when the first Florida association began collecting statistical information, some churches did not file reports. Through the years, to the current day, the non-reporting by some churches does skew the statistical profile, but not the overall growth trend.

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