

LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2022, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature Florida Baptists' missions' commitment as reflected in the people and events that inspired their fellow Baptists in the fulfilment of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ to faithfully, "go and make disciples of all nations."

Florida Baptists Continued to Embrace the Great Commission With End of the 1970s and the Start of the 1980s

At the end of the decade of the 1970s, Florida Baptists planned for a continued direct effort to be involved in a Great Commission mission effort halfway around the world.

They readied to participate in what was called a three-year **Korea-Florida Special Project**. It was primarily an effort using Florida Baptists teams, between the years of 1977 and 1979, leading training in stewardship, church growth and witness training to assist Korean Baptists in five major cities. These preliminary activities culminated in 1979 with Florida Baptists-conducted evangelistic crusades in the five major South Korean cities. Pastors and laity in Florida churches were enlisted to participate in the initial training events and the subsequent crusades.

Florida Baptists women volunteered, under the leadership of WMU leader Vanita Baldwin, to be on mission by traveling to Korea. There, using interpreters, the women spoke in churches, mission church meetings, prayer meetings, Bible study groups and in church WMU meetings. At these events the Florida women shared their Christian testimonies, offered encouragement to the Korean Baptist women and gathered prayer requests that they brought back to Florida churches.

When the Korean Crusades had concluded in May and June 1980, the State Board of Missions later reported that 216 Florida Baptists had participated in revivals in five major cities. The results were a total 21,473 professions of faith in Christ and other spiritual decisions.

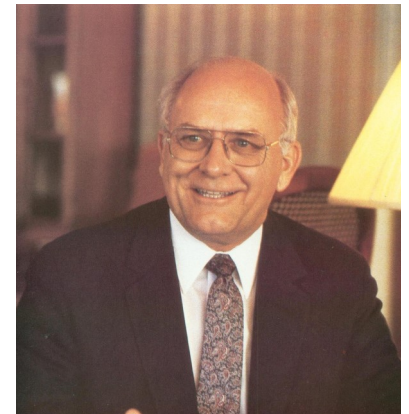
The Decade of the 1980s Brought New Mission Leaders and Opportunities

Prior to the Korean project, in 1977 the Woman's Missionary Union received their new executive secretary **Vanita Baldwin (b. 1926; d. 2022)**. A native of Oak Hill, Florida, and a graduate of Stetson University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Baldwin brought a well-understood awareness of the Florida mission field. Baldwin had previously served as director of Woman's Missionary Union with the Baptist Convention of New Mexico from 1961 to 1977. And prior to that she served as associate director of the Alabama Woman's Missionary Union from 1955 to 1961.



During her tenure, Baldwin visited Florida Baptist churches almost every Sunday, traveled to international mission locations to encourage and support missionaries serving there and led Florida Baptists by advocating for missions' partnerships with other state conventions and countries. She worked tirelessly to promote Florida and Southern Baptist mission offerings and the Cooperative Program, the unified giving program of Southern Baptists.

Within two years of Baldwin taking a post with the Florida Baptist Convention, another missions' advocate was added. At the end of 1979, the State Board of Missions selected **Dan C. Stringer (b. 1927; d. 2007)** as its executive director-treasurer. Stringer came to the Florida post from the Northwest Baptist Convention where he held a similar staff position. He previously worked in the Arizona Baptist Convention in various missions' tasks. Previously he served as a pastor of churches in New Mexico, Arizona and Nevada. Having served in several Baptist pioneer mission states, Stringer brought an understanding of the domestic mission field and challenges of helping churches and pastors reaching with the Gospel the spiritually lost.



Interestingly, Stringer had known Vanita Baldwin in New Mexico where they both worked together on state convention committees. "He came to Florida with a high opinion of her speaking skills, and as they worked together" on a variety of mission projects, records Martha Trotter in her history on Florida W.M.U.

Stringer and Baldwin viewed state-to-state missions, as well as international mission partnerships, as a means to broaden Florida Baptists understanding and commitment to the Great Commission. One of the early international mission partnerships Stringer developed and promoted was with the Tanzania (Africa) Baptist Mission. Florida Baptist pastors and laity were encouraged to travel to the African continent to train Baptist leadership in churches and to participate in evangelistic activities. An unexpected mission by-product occurred when refugees from Tanzania's neighbor Rwanda, who were fleeing from the country's political turmoil and ethnic cleansing efforts poured into Tanzania. Florida Baptists assisted in providing food and relief measures in the makeshift refugee camps set up in Tanzania and raised funds in Florida churches to underwrite some relief efforts.

Seeking to provide Florida Baptists a mission opportunity closer to home and less costly to reach, Stringer developed a state-to-state mission partnership with the State Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania-New Jersey. The focus of the partnership was to help start mission churches and provide leadership training to the pastors and laity in what was then considered the Southern Baptist pioneer states of Pennsylvania-New Jersey. This partnership, which encouraged Florida churches to partner with a sister Baptist church in Pennsylvania or New Jersey, lasted more than 20 years.

Another state-to-state partnership involved the **Dakota Southern Baptist Fellowship** and the **Montana Southern Baptist Fellowship**, which were true Southern Baptist pioneer mission areas that were not yet organized as state conventions. Again this partnership encouraged Florida churches to partner with a sister Baptist church in one of the two states and mutually agree to needed projects to be undertaken. The Floridians provided evangelistic outreach, led vacation Bible schools, and conducted revivals, in addition to doing church construction projects.

In the several state-to-state partnerships, Florida Baptists from the pew, at their own expense, were able to visit one of these pioneer mission areas. More importantly, they were able to see firsthand the challenges of starting and growing a church in a spiritually resistant area, while trying to provide leadership training and supportive evangelistic activities. Additionally, over time, the State Board of Missions authorized the provision of pastoral salary assistance and construction loans to the churches in the four pioneer states.

Supporting Missionaries through the Cooperative Program

The Cooperative Program, the unified mission giving program of Southern Baptists, provides an opportunity for every Florida Baptist to financially participate in supporting missionaries and missions activities in Florida, the United States, and around the world. During his tenure, Dan Stringer led churches to more than double their gifts through the Cooperative Program. By 1985 Stringer was able to lead the State Convention to budget Cooperative Program receipts on a 50-50 percentage shared basis distribution between the state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Responding to Refugees

In the early 1980s, refugees continued to arrive on the Florida shores from two islands in the Caribbean: Cuba and Haiti. While that in-migration had been going on since the early 1960s in limited numbers, during the 1980s the numbers swelled. This influx of refugees initially was handled by governmental and non-profit agencies. But some Florida Baptist pastors and laity saw the mission outreach opportunity of sharing the gospel with those new arrivals. Unfortunately, initially, all the State Convention could do was approve a resolution proposed by the State Board of Missions Board urging churches to pray for and minister to the large number of Haitian and Cuban refugees coming ashore in South Florida. As the growing numbers of refugees continued to arrive, Florida Baptist churches began to become more pro-active in meeting both the physical and spiritual needs of these immigrants. This resulted in Florida Baptists starting churches to serve the Haitians and Cubans, which will be described in a later issue of LEGACY.

Brotherhood Involved More Laymen in Mission Activities

Concurrently with growing mission awareness occurring in Florida, the Brotherhood department continued to enlist and train Baptist laymen to be ready to participate in disaster relief opportunities [see July LEGACY]. Also, in 1983 department director Charles Ragland began a program of Florida Baptist Construction Volunteers, which was designed to help build churches and missions. In its first year of existence, these volunteers assisted nine churches and missions. By 1984, 21 churches and missions had been helped. Additionally, during these years, the department continued to encourage and enlist short term mission volunteers to serve in Florida, Pennsylvania/South Jersey, Dakota, Montana, and overseas.

***This series on Florida Baptists' Missions' Commitment
continues next month***