

Vol. 14

June, 2022

No. 6

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' Missions' Commitment Grew Steadily

After nearly seventy-four years (1894 – 1969) the Woman's Missionary Union, as an auxiliary of the Florida Baptist State Convention, established a priority and practice for missions' education, awareness and financial commitment by Florida Baptist women in local churches. Finally in 1969 the auxiliary was merged into the State Board of Missions as another ministry program department. Although the structural relationship changed, the commitment to missions' promotion remained unchanged. Meanwhile, beginning as early as 1928, Florida Baptist men were encouraged to embrace the Layman's Missionary Movement that had begun in 1907. The Florida version – also authorized as a ministry program in 1928 by the State Board of Missions – sought to involve Baptist laymen: in a greater support and cooperation with their pastor; promote Biblical stewardship; and involve men in evangelism activities.

These emphases – **praying, financially supporting and doing mission activities** – by women and men in the local church, laid the groundwork that matured into a better understanding of the implications of the Great Commission at work within the Sunshine State. From the beginning, praying for and providing financial support for missionary activities across Florida was the response to the "Macedonian call" for Baptist women and men.

Changing Missions' Leadership

The year 1974 marked the appointment of two new ministry program leaders to provide encouragement and involvement in missions' education and missions' action. Both, however, only served less than three years each.



Robert W. Rowell (b. 1934), minister of education, Cottage Hill Baptist Church, Mobile, Alabama, was named director of the Brotherhood department, serving from September, 1974, until mid-1977. The South Carolina native had earned both a Master of Religious Education and a Doctor of Education degrees from the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He replaced G.A. Ratterree who retired after 24-years-service in 1974. **Under Rowell's leadership, 97 Florida Baptist men and women participated in the first-ever out-of-country mission action projects with three in Honduras and one project in Antigua.** In addition to constructing two church buildings, one school and a clinic, the Florida Baptist's combined evangelistic efforts resulted in 84 professions of faith in Christ.

Concurrently, Carolyn Weatherford, who had served between 1967 and 1974, leading Florida W.M.U., resigned to accept the leadership post of the SBC Woman's Missionary Union. Weatherford was replaced by **Miss Bernice Popham (b. 1931; d. 2006)**, who previously served as the W.M.U. director, Southern Baptist General Convention of California. The Kentucky native held a Master of Religious Education degree from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Unfortunately, Miss Popham found in Florida a different, more layered, and more challenging organizational structure than she led in California. Additionally, according to Florida W.M.U. Historian Martha Trotter, Miss Popham encountered resistance from Florida's W.M.U. volunteer leaders who still had their loyalties tied to former W.M.U. directors Josephine Jones and Carolyn Weatherford. Bernice Popham, who led Florida W.M.U. from October, 1974, until December 31, 1976, resigned to accept a position in the Missions Ministries department of the Baptist Convention of South Carolina.



“Jerusalem, Judea and the Uttermost Parts . . .”

As Florida Baptists embraced the Cooperative Program beginning in 1925, greater numbers of **Florida Baptists in the pew were introduced to the concept of how they could be personally involved in the Great Commission by financially supporting home and foreign missions.** As the Cooperative Program marked its 50th anniversary, Florida Baptists were earmarking a true 47 percent of their CP gifts to Southern Baptist mission causes supported in “the uttermost parts of the earth.”

In addition to financial support, Florida's laity-initiated world missions' efforts were realized in several projects including: the establishment of an evangelism and ministry-oriented Seaman's Institute in Jacksonville (1919); raising money for a church built in Mendoza, Argentina (1943) to benefit Southern Baptist missionary efforts; the building of a gospel-focused Boys Baptist High School in Nigeria (1944); and responding to the physical and spiritual needs of Cuban refugees fleeing into Florida (1964); among other missions and ministry activities.

State Board's Response to Florida's “Jeruselems”

From its organization in 1880, Florida Baptists' State Board of Missions, under the leadership of Corresponding Secretary **W. N. Chaudoin (b. 1829; d. 1904)**, assumed as its Great Commission assignment to ensure the gospel message was preached in Florida's large and small towns of “Jerusalem.” During the Board's first year, with only \$150 in mission dollars, two missionaries were commissioned to carry the gospel across the Florida frontier.



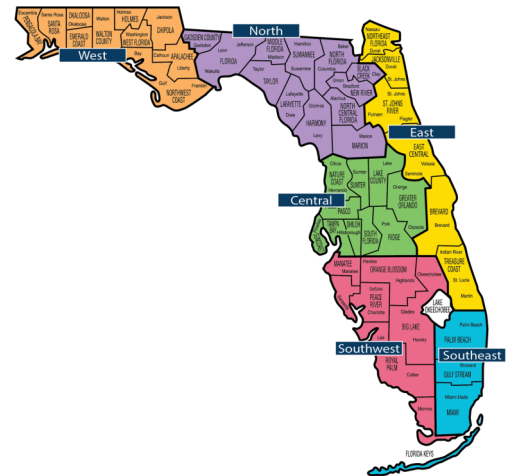
Continuing into the twentieth century, the State Board struggled with securing designated financial resources that helped in developing churches and mission congregations within the Sunshine State. **The focus of these efforts was to provide financial assistance directly to churches, as well as, underwrite the sending of missionary pastors who were assigned to help specific congregations.**

With increased giving by the 1940s through the Cooperative Program, the State Board was able to broaden its missionary vision. **That vision included the establishment of several financial assistance programs to help churches and missions.** These programs ranged from direct grants and low interest loans to funds earmarked to construct church facilities or acquire currently needed new mission church sites, as well as, purchase potential church property sites that were identified as future population growth areas.

Local Baptist Associations Became the “Judeas”

Also in the 1940s, as the number of churches increased and their Cooperative Program mission gifts increased, the State Board was provided with greater financial resources to expand the much-needed mission work within the “Judeas” of Florida.

One approach was a city missions’ program that assigned and funded district missionaries in the four metro areas to develop a coordinated strategy of strengthening existing churches and establishing mission congregations in the growing population areas. Within a year, a similar jointly funded rural missions’ program was undertaken designed to help struggling churches in the state’s many rural Baptist associations. District missionaries were appointed to assist defined regions that typically encompassed three to five rural Baptist associations. **These “Judean” missionary efforts, in time, evolved into the current 47 self-supporting Baptist associations, many led by a director of missions.** Today these associations define and self-support missionary and ministry activities within their respective geographical area.



Florida Baptists Undertook Direct Missionary Activities To the “Uttermost Parts of the Earth”

By 1969 Florida Baptists’ began to accept the challenge to become directly involved in missionary activities outside of Florida. First, there was a commitment by Florida Baptist churches to participate in the Crusades of Americas. Church sponsored teams traveled to conduct evangelistic training and outreach that assisted local Southern Baptist churches in the cities of Cleveland, Ohio and Buffalo, New York. A few years later the State Board of Missions committed to a mission’s partnership with the Baptists of Michigan. Florida Baptist churches again sent evangelistic teams to assist and strengthen local churches and their leaders in evangelistic outreach.

The year 1977 was a noteworthy year for Florida Baptists in coming face-to-face with the missionary opportunities and the challenges of taking the gospel to the “uttermost parts of the earth.” First, messengers to the 1977 Florida Baptist State Convention participated in the first-ever foreign missionary commissioning service conducted in Florida. The nine missionary candidates were native Floridians. Those individuals, their hometowns and places of appointment included: M. Joseph and Jeanie Benfield of Fernandina Beach, assigned to Uruguay; Jack and Charlotte Ford of St. Petersburg, assigned to Gaza; Malcolm G. and Jean Nichols of Clearwater, assigned to Korea; Edwin R. and Dorothy Segars of Orlando, assigned to Thailand; and Anne Sliger of Pensacola, assigned to Rhodesia.

Additionally, messengers approved a State Board of Missions’ proposal to participate in a three-year Korean Crusade evangelism emphasis. Again, teams of volunteers from Florida churches were enlisted to travel to South Korea during 1977 and 1978 to train local Baptists to ready them to lead evangelistic outreach activities. This culminated in 1979 with Florida Baptists-conducted evangelistic crusades in major South Korean cities.

This series on Florida Baptists’ Missions’ Commitment continues next month