



FLORIDA BAPTIST  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

# LEGACY

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

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**LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people 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 Transitions to Urban from Rural**

During the two decades from 1920 to 1939, Florida experienced a period of growth and dynamic change. Most notably the population doubled (to 1,897,414 from 968,470), there was an expansion of industry, and the growth in public and private wealth that came with the development and expansion of Florida cities, particularly along the Atlantic coast.



In 1920, there were 751 Florida Baptist churches with a total of 65,094 members. By 1939, the number of churches increased to 817 with a combined membership of 155,965. These statistics reflected that total church membership had increased at a far greater rate than the seven percent growth in the number of churches. The phenomenal growth in membership experienced by some city churches was due in part to the large population shift from rural areas to the cities. The in-state migration presented new challenges for both city and rural churches. For city congregations it was the evangelistic challenge and ministry opportunities created by the swelling numbers of new residents. "The growth of our cities constitutes one of our most difficult problems," Secretary-Treasurer **Charles M. Brittain (b. 1873; d. 1943)** reported to the 1941 annual State Convention meeting. But for too many rural churches, many without pastors, the issue was one of survival.

This population shift marked the beginning of the transition from a predominantly rural state to a predominantly urban state. It also was a period bracketed by the end of World War I, economic growth and then the havoc brought on by the Great Depression, that culminated in the growing military conflict in Europe that was the precursor to World War II. Noting the lack of financial resources to undertake Convention-sponsored evangelistic efforts, Brittain declared that local churches needed to be more missions-conscious. He encouraged local churches to proclaim the gospel by organizing "mission schools" and "establishing preaching stations" in the newly developing city neighborhoods. In the context of Florida's growth in mission opportunities, the organized mission efforts of women and men took on new impetus.

### Efficiency Movement Influenced Missions Commitment



As noted in the February *LEGACY*, Florida W.M.U. corresponding secretary and treasurer for 18 years, Miss Jennie Spalding resigned in 1911. She was succeeded by **Mrs. H. C. Peelman (b. 1866; d. 1943)**, who led the organization for the next 25 years. During the first two decades of the twentieth century there was a growing emphasis upon the Efficiency Movement – an effort that sought to bring accountability, organization and centralization within Southern Baptist program organizations. Each organization was to establish standards and strive to meet them. In her 1913 presidential address to the Florida W. M. U., Mrs. N.C. Wamboldt focused on the need for greater efficiency in missionary education. In the same year, Mrs. Peelman called for leadership development, better ways of conducting meetings, and the use of the prayer calendar and other promotional aids to increase missions’ activities.

As a result of the efficiency emphasis, local W. M. U. groups developed written constitutions, regularly elected officers, and undertook an increased effort to form associational WMU organizations. There also developed a consensus for the need of a statewide worker to develop and promote mission programs that would attract younger Baptist women. Between 1924 and 1929, Mrs. Willie Lee Harrell was employed as the young people’s leader to work with young women, girls and boys. She was later replaced by Louise Smith a native of Kentucky.

During the Peelman years (1911 – 1936) the statewide W.M.U. organization grew significantly to 1,574 age-group units in 1936 from 211 women’s missionary societies and auxiliaries in 1911. By 1936, the total membership reached 23,300 women, girls and boys. Annual contributions – not including the special needs offerings taken from time to time – for state, home and foreign missions increased to \$89,018 in 1936 from \$5,465. In 1936, after 25 years of unrelentingly committed service, Mrs. H. C. Peelman was requested to retire from service. The bittersweet recommendation – apparently tempered by the reality of Mrs. Peelman’s 70 years of age and the need for new leadership – the W.M. U. Executive Committee cited the need based upon “the work’s sake and out of hearts of gratitude.”

### Louise Smith Tapped to Lead W.M.U.

In 1936 the W.M.U. Executive Committee recommended that the State Board of Missions elect **Louise Smith (b. 1901; d. 1996)** as the new W.M.U. department secretary (director). Smith had demonstrated, under the tutelage of Mrs. Peelman, to be a strong advocate not only for the young people’s program emphasis, but for the entire W.M.U. ministry. With much of her time being spent on the road traveling across the state, Smith stimulated the growth in the number of young woman’s auxiliaries (Y.W.A.) in churches, on college campuses, hospitals and nursing schools.



In her new leadership role, Smith achieved several accomplishments: initiated race relations mission activities between Anglo and African-American children and women; developed mission activities among Florida’s Seminole Indians; started state Royal Ambassador camps for boys; and led Florida W.M.U. to raise over \$35,000 to pay off SBC agency debts. Beginning in 1939 Miss Smith started what became a successful multi-year effort to collect funds to build a Baptist church in Mendoza, Argentina, in memory of native Floridian and first SBC-appointed foreign missionary Dr. Frank Fowler.

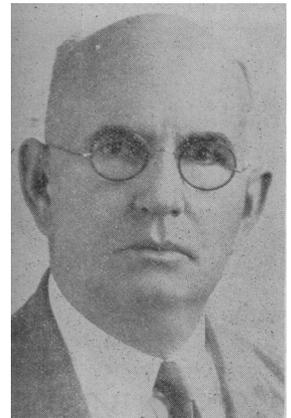
### **The Layman's Movement Becomes Brotherhood**

By the 1920s the Florida Layman's Missionary Movement still had no central organization. However, that did not prevent the movement to continue to raise funds to erase debts of the Home and Foreign Mission boards. The movement decried what they collectively viewed as the unbusinesslike method of financial support for missions responding to annual ad hoc appeals for funds. Instead, Florida's loosely connected regional laymen groups, advocated a weekly offering rather than a yearly pledge to provide a stable funding foundation for mission activities. Not only was the weekly plan – and the use of duplex envelopes – more efficient, they said; it was also “the scriptural method.”

The Laymen's Movement entered a new era of emphasis and organization between 1926 – 1939. At the national level, the Southern Baptist Convention in 1926 re-named the movement as The Baptist Brotherhood of the South. Hugh Latimer, who later led the Florida Brotherhood, argued that, “men would be more easily interested and enlisted if the scope of the movement was broadened to include the entire denominational program rather than having it restricted to” missions' promotion. He further stressed that by the use of the word “brotherhood” would embrace both pastors and laymen. Latimer went on to observe that, “no pastor can hope to realize the maximum possibility of his ministry aside from the cooperation of his laymen.”

### **Florida Laymen Leadership Emerges**

In August 15, 1928, **W.G. Upchurch (b. 1878; d. 1950)** was elected by the State Board of Missions as Florida's Brotherhood director. During his tenure Upchurch continued by example and encouragement to lead laymen to become involved in evangelism. Prior to selling his wholesale grocery enterprise, Upchurch had been actively organizing and promoting evangelism through newly organized laymen soul-winning groups, while a member of Jacksonville's Main Street Baptist Church. Later, as a deacon of First Baptist Church, Bradenton, he was an active soul-winner and strong proponent of the layman's movement. Those “hands-on” experiences were sufficient credentials to lead the statewide Brotherhood effort. However, with the onset of the Depression and the reduction in Cooperative Program income by 1931, caused the State Board of Missions to suspend the work of both the Brotherhood and Student programs.



After a five years hiatus, and an improved economy, the State Board in 1936 was able to fund the restart of the Brotherhood program. **Hugh F. Latimer (b. 1879; d. 1962)**, was selected to lead the statewide emphasis. Previously, Latimer had been serving as the Florida representative for the Southern Baptist Annuity Board promoting retirement services for pastors. In his first year leading the Brotherhood, he was able to organize 26 new Brotherhood units in as many churches. During his leadership Florida's church Brotherhoods increased in numbers by 50 percent while associational Brotherhoods increased 40 percent. His leadership was so effective that in 1939 the SBC Brotherhood of the South employed Latimer as associate director.

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