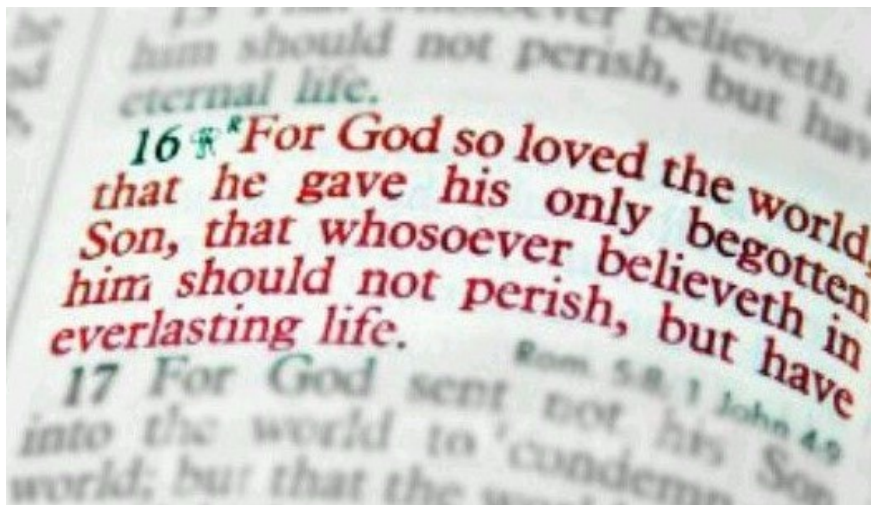


LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2022, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature Florida Baptists' missions' commitment as reflected in the people and 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."



Continued Expansion of Florida Baptists' "Hands-On" Missionary Commitment/Involvement

Florida Baptists' missions' commitment – as previously reported in *LEGACY* – began to increase significantly by the end of the decade of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s. During that period, Florida Baptists expanded and further responded to the Great Commission's Biblical imperatives by their expanded commitment to missionary outreach and evangelistic ministry activities at home and abroad. Those mission efforts ranged from domestic states considered by Southern Baptists as pioneer states that were sorely in need of greater evangelical witness, to international mission outreach in Africa and the Caribbean, particularly Haiti. However, at the end of the 1990s and as they moved into the decade of 2000 to 2010, Florida Baptists identified new mission outposts in which to share the Gospel of Christ. Those missionary endeavors continued to expand to several new international opportunities: **Cuba (1997 to present); Belgium (2002-2013); and Brazil's Amazon River Basin (2005-2013)**. Additionally, the domestic mission activities took on new opportunities that included: **West Virginia (2002-2013); Indiana (2002-2013); Nevada (2005-2011); and a ministry targeted towards Hispanics in Kentucky (2006-2012)**.

Convention Staff Provided Leadership

During this period, the leading and encouraging of Florida Baptists to continue to be committed and involved in these multiple mission partnerships was Florida Baptist Convention **Executive Director-Treasurer Dr. John Sullivan** who served from 1989 to 2015. And although the State Board of Missions proposed the partnerships and approved the funding and operational details, messengers to the annual meetings of the Florida Baptist State Convention, in various

years, authorized the respective proposed partnerships. Florida Baptists' individual and collective support of those missionary endeavors were underscored by their commitment as volunteers to travel to these out of way places, as well as their financial support through the Cooperative Program (Florida Baptists' unified giving effort) that helped to underwrite Florida Baptists' missionary efforts, as well as Southern Baptist missionary causes.

As a result of the increasing number of missionary endeavors, an increased coordination of efforts were required by the Convention. To that end, the State Board of Missions in 1999 authorized a staff position of Partnership Missions Coordinator. Former Florida pastor and then current Convention field missionary **Craig Culbreth** (pictured) was selected to not only work with the Baptist leadership in the partnership states and international countries, he also was tasked with the enlistment of Florida Baptist churches and volunteers who became the “hands, feet and voice” of the Great Commission.



“Cuba for Christ” Became a Clarion Call for Florida Baptists that Resonates to this Day

Florida Baptists acceptance to the 1997 invitation by Cuban Baptists to enter into a contemporary missions' partnership was not a “first time ever” action. Rather it was a return to a commitment first made in 1885 when Florida Baptist pastor **William F. Wood** a pastor at the Fernandina Baptist Church, responded to the “Macedonia call” to take the Gospel to the island nation of Cuba. He initially ministered in Key West where Cuban refugees had migrated. Joined by **Adela Fales**, Wood traveled to the island nation to diligently preach the Gospel and trained other Cubans to serve as pastors. Miss Fales conducted evangelistic outreach to mothers and children. Up until then all spiritual matters in Cuba were under Roman Catholic domination.



Responding to Wood's call to bring about “Cuba for Christ,” the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board agreed to initially support the work of **Rev. Alberto Dias**, who had lived in America as an exile, but who founded Gethsemane Baptist Church in Havana. Soon, a cooperative agreement was reached between Southern Baptists and the Northern Baptist Convention (now called American Baptists) to accept responsibility for mission work in Eastern Cuba. Southern Baptists agreed to undertake mission work in Western Cuba. During the first half of the twentieth century Southern Baptists assigned missionary personnel and provided funding to underwrite the training of pastors and the starting of churches.

Socialism Took Hold, but the Gospel Survived

In 1959 a people's revolution against the dictator Fulgencio Batista regime occurred, that was successfully led by Fidel Castro, who brought a socialist-based government and economy to the country. Subsequently all religious activities were closely monitored and controlled by the Castro government which had embraced a Communist political philosophy. By 1967 all outside groups, including Southern Baptists and their missionary personnel, were outlawed and forced to leave the island nation. The Christian work remained the responsibility of the few Cuban Baptist pastors and laity who remained in the country, after many other pastors had fled in response to the Cuban government's persecution and legal charges against many pastors who were declared either as anti-revolutionary or “spies” for the United States.

Despite continuing government interference, Cuban Baptist churches managed to grow and reach people for Christ. By 1997, the Western Cuba Baptist Convention had 135 cooperating churches, 152 missions and 231 home worship centers. Between 1990 and 1995, these congregations reported a 448 percent increase in baptisms which totaled 1889 in the year 1995. Total church members numbered 11,916. Finally, in the Providence of God's time by 1997 the Florida State Board of Missions considered and approved a request by the Western Cuba Baptist Convention leadership to enter into a missions' partnership. Convention staff **Dr. Raul Vazquez**, director of the Language Missions Division, and **Dr. Frank Moreno**, director of the Hispanic Church Extension and Development department, negotiated the preliminary agreement and laid the groundwork for the startup of the missions' partnership. Initially there were many legal hurdles created by the Cuban and U.S. governments, even requiring Florida Baptists' volunteer teams to travel to Cuba through a neutral third country. Yet the partnership began to function.

The partnership eventually focused upon: ministry to churches; leadership development of pastors and laity; strengthening the ministry of the Cuban Baptist seminary by providing teaching personnel; and mission projects consisting of evangelism, pastor and leader training, and construction projects. A special project provided funding to underwrite financial assistance to retired pastors. To underwrite the startup costs and execution of the partnership, the State Board of Missions earmarked \$90,000. Over the next several years, funding sources included Cooperative Program funds and designated funds from the Maguire State Mission Offering. The missions' partnership between Florida and the Western Cuba Baptist Convention continues to the present day.

International Missions/Belgium

Also in 1997, the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board (now called the International Mission Board) enlisted the Florida Baptist Convention to assist Belgium Baptists in the evangelization of the Belgium people, as well as provide training and encouragement to the Belgium pastors and the Southern Baptist missionaries assigned to the country. Subsequently in 2004, the International Mission Board made a major change to its mission strategy and increased its assigned missionary personnel in a newly combined region renamed the France-Benelux Mission.



In the new missions' strategy, Florida Baptists were called upon to volunteer and assist the Union of Baptists in Belgium churches in evangelistic outreach in their local respective communities. These evangelistic events and other community awareness events served as the basis for starting new churches. One such community event involved police officers from Florida Baptist churches leading community support events with fellow officers in Belgium (pictured). These events provided an opportunity to share the Gospel and strengthen the credibility of the Belgium congregations.

International Outreach/Brazil's Amazon River Basin

Another missionary project proposed to Florida Baptists in 2004-2005 by the SBC International Mission Board was a missions' partnership with the Brazilian Baptist Convention. At the heart of the endeavor was the sending of Florida Baptist volunteers to travel along the Amazon River Basin and share the Gospel with the various indigenous Indian tribes, many of whom had never heard the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. Although this was a specialized missionary endeavor, some Florida Baptists – at their own expense – responded to the “Macedonian call” to literally take the Gospel where it had never been. This ministry continued until 2013.

Four Domestic States Received Missions and Ministry Support WEST VIRGINIA

Approved to begin in 2002, the mission's partnership with West Virginia Southern Baptists focused upon strengthening the ministry of churches in a state classified as "new work" by the North American Mission Board. The partnership involved Florida Baptists providing volunteers to conduct revival and evangelism events, providing leadership development and training as well as assisting local churches in their outreach to their local communities. Additionally, the State Board of Missions provided funding to underwrite church/pastor salary assistance and grants to purchase new mission sites and/or church startup costs. During the next decade, Florida Baptists' overall mission and ministry managed to help strengthen the witness and ministry of local Southern Baptist churches across West Virginia and enhance their presence in their respective community.

INDIANA

In a partnership to also strengthen the mission strategy of the State Convention of Baptists in Indiana, Florida Baptists' State Board of Missions entered into a partnership agreement that began in 2002 and subsequently continued for the next ten years. The effort initially enlisted Florida Baptist volunteers to assist local churches across Indiana through evangelism and community outreach. The State Board of Missions also authorized funding to provide financial assistance for church/pastor salary assistance to financially struggling congregations and grants for church starting efforts in communities without a Baptist witness.

NEVADA

In another partnership to strengthen the mission strategy of the Nevada Baptist Convention of Southern Baptists, the Florida Baptist State Board of Missions entered into a partnership agreement that began in 2005 and subsequently continued for the next six years. This also was a state classified as "new work" by the North American Mission Board requiring support and financial assistance from an older more established Southern Baptist state convention. The primary focus by Florida Baptists was the provision of church pastor salary assistance and other financial resources to undergird the ministry of struggling Nevada Baptist churches seeking to establish an evangelical identity and ministry in new communities.

HISPANICS IN KENTUCKY

In the year 2006, the Florida Baptist State Convention authorized a unique partnership agreement to encourage Florida Baptist Hispanic congregations to commit to assist sister Hispanic churches in the State Convention of Kentucky. The ministry focus sought to develop and strengthen Hispanic churches through the provision of such resources as evangelism saturation events in local communities, provide pastor and laity development and training, and provide theological education for the Hispanic pastoral leaders. After the first two years, the State Board of Missions learned that five Florida Hispanic churches sent 47 people who participated in 1,400 door-to-door evangelism visits and conducted related preaching events. Initially 12 professions of faith were reported. Additionally, Florida Baptist Convention language staff (pictured) conducted training events in 16 cities for 699 persons from 96 Hispanic churches. Again, the goal was realized to strengthen the evangelical identity and ministry of Hispanic congregations in new and existing communities across Kentucky.



This concludes the series on Florida Baptists' Missions' Commitment