



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."



The September issue of *LEGACY* concluded by noting, that as a result of Florida Baptists' involvement in disaster relief, they had set a new benchmark for themselves in fulfilling the Great Commandment (Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind," and secondly, "Love your neighbor as yourself.") and the Great Commission ("go and make disciples of all nations").

However, at the end of the decade of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s, Florida Baptists expanded and further responded to those Biblical imperatives by their 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. 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. **Leading and encouraging Florida Baptists to become committed and involved in these multiple mission partnerships was Florida Baptist Convention Executive Director-Treasurer Dr. John Sullivan who served from 1989 to 2015.**

Home Mission Endeavors

As previously noted in the August issue of *LEGACY*, beginning in 1978 Florida Baptists committed to state-to-state partnerships with several Southern Baptist pioneer missions' areas: **the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania-South Jersey (1978 – 2002) and the Southern Baptist Fellowships of Montana, South and North Dakota (1987 – 2004).** Those partnerships were multi-purpose, including State Board of Missions' funding of: pastoral salary assistance for persons serving in those pioneer areas; enlistment of laity and church leadership to provide evangelistic training events; as well as funds to underwrite church and mission starting.

Additionally, the mission efforts enlisted Florida churches to send mission teams, primarily comprised of laity, to participate in evangelistic outreach activities and church construction projects designed to strengthen the positive presence of Southern Baptists. To coordinate and match the Florida teams with the spiritually needy churches in the pioneer areas, the Florida Baptist Convention contracted with several couples. The first couple was **Howard and Jean Girard**, who as Mission Service Corps volunteers from Ocala, served for 15 years as partnership coordinators for the Pennsylvania-South Jersey area (1981 – 1988; and 1994 – 1996) and for the states of North and South Dakota and Montana (1989 – 1993). Another Florida couple, was former director of missions **Herbert Goodroe and his spouse Margaret**, who served as regional partnership coordinators for the eastern portions of North and South Dakota between 1994 and 1996. Additionally, retired Orlando area director of missions **Eddie Gilstrap and his spouse Hazel**, served as regional partnership coordinators for the western portion of Montana between 1994 and 1997.

International Missionary Outreach/Tanzania

Earlier, in the mid-1980s, Florida Baptist Convention **Executive Director-Treasurer Dan Stringer (b. 1927; d. 2007)** visited the African nation of Tanzania for the purpose of reviewing possibilities for entering into a mission partnership with the Tanzania Baptist Mission, supported by the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign Mission Board (now the International Mission Board). However, due to a variety of circumstances, that partnership did not become a reality until the next decade. The Florida State Board of Missions approved the proposed partnership in 1990, although it was not until 1993 that the arrangements were in place to facilitate Florida Baptist mission teams traveling to Tanzania.

The missions' partnership enlisted Florida Baptist pastors and laity to participate in evangelism outreach projects, leadership development training and church development projects in Tanzanian Baptist churches. To coordinate the Florida teams with the needs of the indigenous churches, Florida Baptists **J. Thomas and Annette Harper**



served from 1993 to the end of 1995. The combined efforts of 250 Florida Baptist volunteers resulted in a variety of ministry and evangelism projects being conducted and more than 7,000 reported professions of faith being made.



As noted in the August issue of *LEGACY*, 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, sought refuge in Tanzania in 1993-94. For 47-weeks, Florida Baptists assisted in providing food, relief measures and evangelism outreach in the makeshift refugee camps set up in Tanzania. These efforts resulted in 449 professions of faith being made during two evangelistic crusades. The State Board of Missions earmarked \$100,000 for direct Tanzania/Rwandan refugee relief. The Board

also directed Executive Director-Treasurer John Sullivan to solicit designated offerings from Florida Baptists, which resulted in \$52,029 being raised and designated for use in the Tanzanian refugee camps.

Caribbean Baptist Fellowship Partnership

In response to an invitation from the Caribbean Baptist Fellowship, the Florida State Board of Missions approved a missions' partnership in the early 1990s. The primary focus of the agreement was to strengthen the evangelism and ministry activities and enhance the respective community visibility of the Baptist churches cooperating with the Caribbean Fellowship. During a period between September, 1994, and December, 1995, Florida Baptist volunteers conducted a variety of mission and ministry activities, including: 17 construction projects; nine leadership training events; 21 evangelism outreach projects; 25 Vacation Bible Schools; and 20 other miscellaneous medical missions projects.

Island Nation of Haiti Became Florida Baptists' Missions' Opportunity

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Baptist Convention of Haiti, which was organized in 1964, had been assisted by the SBC Foreign Mission Board (now the International Mission Board) since 1978. The F.M.B. missionaries assigned to Haiti provided indirect evangelism activities. These activities included agricultural assistance, water projects, humanitarian aid and some church growth projects. In the decade of the late 1980s, continued economic duress and political unrest caused several hundred-thousands to flee to the United States for asylum.

Among the emigrants were God-called men who had started, developed and served as long-time pastors of Baptist churches in Haiti. Once resettled in Florida, those pastors continued their evangelistic fervor by the preaching of the gospel and starting of churches which served the Haitian emigrants settled throughout South Florida. Within a few years of the initiation of the partnership, **there were 127 Haitian Baptist churches started in Florida, with a combined membership of approximately 6,500.** Many of these churches became cooperating members of local Baptist associations, which automatically affiliated the churches with the Florida Baptist State Convention.



Responding to the needs for member training and leadership development in the Haitian churches, the Florida Baptist Convention established a Haitian Church Extension and Development department. Additionally, the Convention set-up programs of theological education in Florida and Haiti to train existing and potential pastors for the Haitian congregations. In turn, many of the Florida-based Haitian pastors traveled to their homeland to conduct evangelistic events that resulted in the organization of 60 mission churches. But the need existed for church member training and pastoral leadership development.



These Florida-based Haitian pastors proposed that the Florida Baptist Convention assist in the growth and development of the 60-plus mission churches in Haiti. Subsequently, in 1993 the Florida State Board of Missions, in consultation with the SBC Foreign Mission Board, considered and approved a request from the Baptist Convention of Haiti to enter into a missions' partnership. **The state-to-nation relationship committed Florida Baptists to provide evangelism resources, church starting assistance and church member development of the Haitian Baptist congregations.** In addition to organizing four Baptist associations within the island nation, the Florida Baptist Convention employed five native Haitian pastors to serve

as area director of missions. Florida Baptist church volunteers were enlisted to provide the missions and ministry activities.

However, the missions' commitment by Florida Baptists was not limited to missionary activities, but humanitarian needs as well. Practically, every year from 1980, Haiti was struck by either major tropical storms, or hurricanes, and in 2010 a major earthquake, all of which caused flooding, wide spread destruction of buildings and churches, and hundreds of thousands of deaths. Florida Baptists responded with financial contributions to underwrite relief efforts, shipments of rice and beans (a staple of the Haitian diet), and volunteers who helped re-build churches.

As a result of the efforts by Florida Baptists being “on-mission” in the island nation, Haitian Baptists grew in numbers and strength. Beginning in 1995, the number of cooperating Baptist churches had increased to 166 from the original 60 missions, with a reported 1,489 baptisms and a combined membership of 8,530. After 15 years of missionary efforts, in 2009, Haitian Baptists grew to 1,229 churches, reporting 13,090 baptisms, and a combined membership of 71,068. The state-to-nation partnership continues into 2022.

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