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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 Baptists Set New Benchmark In Disaster Relief Response

Prior to 1992, Florida Baptists' disaster relief efforts were considered to be a short-term response to isolated needs. As reported in the July issue of LEGACY, Florida Baptists only 20 years earlier had developed a simple disaster relief response plan that would coordinate the efforts of a couple hundred Florida Baptist volunteers. The 1972 multi-faceted action plan addressed organization, response efforts, financing and relationships with other disaster response organizations. At the heart of the planned effort was to provide financial and rebuilding assistance to churches, as well as providing a spiritual ministry to the needs of persons within disaster zones.

Unfortunately, all previous concepts of disaster relief were redefined by Hurricane Andrew. Considered the "Big One" that category 5 hurricane made landfall in South Florida's Dade County on August 23-24, 1992.

The third strongest hurricane in U. S. history resulted in 38 deaths, destroyed 137,500 homes, and caused \$26.5 billion in damage, the most expensive natural disaster in the United States. An estimated 250,000 people were left homeless without electricity, water, food resources and other basic essential for days while some services were unavailable for many more weeks. The hurricane also damaged 35 Florida Baptist churches – with more than 20 severely damaged or destroyed.

14,000 Baptist Volunteers Responded

For more than 160 years, Florida Baptist men and women had been developing a missions' consciousness, commitment, preparation and mission action for carrying out Jesus Christ's Great Commandment and Great Commission at home and abroad. This role gradually grew over the years. The ultimate test came when Hurricane Andrew struck South Florida and presented the challenge for Florida Baptists to truly demonstrate Christian love and ministry action in the midst of a great disaster.

Leading and coordinating the Florida Baptist disaster response effort was **Cecil Seagle (b. 1939)** who at the time, from 1991 to 1994, was director of the Florida Baptist Convention's Baptist Men's department. Seagle, and his wife Peggy re-located to live and work in the facilities of the Pembroke Road Baptist Church, Miramar, that served for ten weeks as the Florida Baptist disaster relief coordination center. Seagle, who later was named director of the Convention's Missions Division (serving from 1994 to 2011) coordinated and directed the response activities of the 14,000 Southern Baptist volunteers who assisted in relief efforts. Seagle (pictured on left) consulted with Florida Baptist Convention's Missions Division director James Goodson during the 1992 Hurricane Andrew relief response.



Over an eight-week period those trained Southern Baptist volunteers, including thousands from Florida Baptist churches, were mobilized. They provided food services, child care, medical care, debris clean-up, temporary repairs to damaged buildings and grief and spiritual counseling. These services were beyond the scope of local and state government efforts, including the mobilization of the National Guard.

The Florida Baptist-led response focused on three aspects – rescue, recovery, and rebuild. **The initial rescue and relief ministry** focused on providing food, water and first aid. The ministry was sorely needed in areas without electrical service that kept grocery stores and restaurants closed for days and weeks. **The recovery phase** was directed at rebuilding the needs of the 35 Southern Baptist congregations damaged by Andrew. **The third phase** in the relief effort in South Dade County sought to coordinate thousands of Baptist volunteers who assisted in rebuilding and repairing homes of uninsured and under insured homeowners. State convention staff identified 250 families – Baptists and non-Baptists – whose homes were subsequently repaired.

State Convention Staff Involvement

Additionally, 62 employees of the Florida Baptist Convention – from secretaries to program directors – and 19 jointly funded home missionary personnel logged over 2,000 days working in various relief effort assignments ranging from washing pots and pans to changing diapers, from stocking warehouses to unloading trucks, from answering telephones to drawing up plans and schedules. Additionally, some staff worked directly with pastors and churches by providing cash assistance to support ministries that lost weekly offering income. “We rotated staff in and out for a long, long time to give us some continuity, to give some understanding of our ministry and simply to say to Miami Baptists, we’re here and we’re willing to help,” said **John Sullivan (b. 1936)**, executive director-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention.

Sullivan who served the Convention from 1989 to 2014, was the first executive director since 1926, to make a tour of hurricane-ravaged South Florida, to obtain a first-hand assessment of the affected churches. Previously **Charles M. Brittain (b. 1873; d. 1943)**, the Convention's secretary-treasurer from 1926 to 1941, travelled by train from Jacksonville to Broward and Dade counties to visit the 13 churches that were severely damaged. He subsequently led the State Board of Missions to make the first-ever allocation (goal of \$25,000) for disaster relief efforts.



In his contemporary visit, John Sullivan spent two weeks not only viewing the damage, but conducted face-to-face meetings with many of the pastors whose churches and communities were affected by Hurricane Andrew's destruction. He provided a "listening ear," spiritual encouragement and spent time in prayer with the pastors. T. G. "John" Sullivan (pictured on right) was shown the remains of a church building in 1992 by a Florida Baptist disaster relief volunteer.

Financial Response by Southern Baptists

The month following the late August hurricane, Sullivan requested the State Board of Missions to designate a \$1.5 million financial aid package to help the devastated congregations in the Miami Baptist Association. The funds, among other purposes, were used to provide temporary salaries for the pastors and staffs of the affected churches; to fill the gap between insurance and replacement values of church buildings; and to replace church contents not covered by insurance.

Subsequently, **more than \$3,228,224 was contributed by over 2,000 Southern Baptists** and others, including businesses, churches, Sunday school classes, Baptist associations, state conventions and \$419,000 from the S.B.C. Home Mission Board (now called the North American Mission Board). The \$3.2 million-plus, comprised of small and large gifts, was an unprecedented amount for the Florida Baptist Convention to receive in unsolicited giving. All the funds received were used in the relief and recovery efforts.

Feeding the Displaced Residents

Within days of the arrival of the 14 Southern Baptist feeding units, they were positioned at churches along the hurricane's destructive path, particularly where restaurants and grocery stores were unable to operate without electricity. **Those feeding units from 10 Southern Baptist state conventions, in total prepared two million meals to displaced residents and relief workers for up to six months after the disaster.** One of the Florida Baptist feeding units was assigned to First Baptist Church of Cutler Ridge which was operational the day following the hurricane. Within the first four hours of food service, over 2,000 residents were fed. Dan Chandler, at the time a deacon at the Cutler Ridge Church and a recently trained Florida Baptist disaster relief volunteer, coordinated the feeding ministry in the early days after the hurricane's passage. "I would like the people of this community to see the name Baptist and know that we really care," he said at the time. He noted that ninety percent of the people in the Cutler Ridge community were spiritually lost, and expressed the hope that people would see "that we can also meet their spiritual needs."

The late Tommy Watson, former pastor of the First Baptist Church, Perrine, observed at the time, "The hurricane was an automatic equalizer for people to go beyond the superficial differences that usually separate them. Some people who had never stood in line for anything stood in line to get one of the 169,000 meals" prepared and served from a feeding unit set-up at the Perrine church. The pastor further explained, "We had bank presidents, lawyers and doctors standing in line to get something to eat. It was a humbling experience. It showed that all of us at times need to depend on someone other than ourselves."

Andrew Set a New Record

Before Hurricane Andrew, and excluding the Keys, there hadn't been a landfalling hurricane in South Florida since 1964's Isbell hit near Everglades City, reported the *Palm Beach Post*, in a year 2022 story posted on the 30th anniversary of Hurricane Andrew. The newspaper went on to report that previously, Hurricane David skimmed the east coast from Stuart to Daytona Beach in 1979 and Hurricane Floyd strafed Key Largo in 1987.

During the 1992 annual meeting of the Florida Baptist State Convention held in Fort Myers, messengers approved 18 separate resolutions of appreciation to those Southern Baptist individuals, churches and state conventions that had participated in the Hurricane Andrew relief response effort. **The Baptist relief volunteers and cash contributions from the following nine state convention also were commended: Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Missouri, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.**

In a separate resolution, Florida Baptists were recognized for having “demonstrated Christian love and charity toward hurricane victims” by sending cash donations, building materials and volunteers “to help in the rebuilding of people’s lives, their homes, and the Southern Baptist church buildings which serve the devastated communities.”

The resolution concluded by noting, “to these faithful legions, we salute you in the name of the Lord.” Florida Baptists had set a new benchmark for themselves in fulfilling the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.



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