

## March 2023 – Volume 15, Number 3

*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 2023, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of selected Florida Baptist men and women, who through their Christian commitment, have demonstrated Legacy Leadership in their ministry service on the Florida Baptist mission field. These persons, could join with the Apostle Paul, in declaring as "God's fellow workers" they have "laid a foundation" for God's kingdom on earth and upon which "someone else is building" [II Corinthians 3:9-10NIV].*

### **Tanna Dawson: Long-time Missions' Advocate**

Initially recognized as the supportive spouse of one of Florida Baptists most significant director of missions – A.D. Dawson (b. 1916; d. 1979) – Tanna Dawson was a missions' advocate in her own right for nearly six decades as she ministered across the Florida missions' field.

Her legacy as a missions' advocate was present during her 60-plus years' service as a volunteer worker in the Gulf Stream Baptist Association and her statewide involvement in the Florida Woman's Missionary Union.

### **A Philadelphia Native**

Born October 13, 1919 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, her parents called their first daughter Tatiana Maze Temoshchuk. The Temoshchuks had emigrated from Russia in their late teens and were not practicing Christians. However, the young couple's first encounter with the gospel message was at the Russian-language Russian Baptist Church. When Tatiana was four years old, her father accepted Christ and six months later her mother made a profession of faith.



Her parents' Christian faith, which evolved to be quite strong, greatly influenced Tatiana. And at age 14 she made a profession of faith and was baptized. A year later she felt God-called to be a missionary. To pursue her vocational calling she attended the Philadelphia College of the Bible. It was at the school that Tatiana met Albert Dawson whom she agreed to date only after she learned that he, too, was interested in mission work. The couple married in 1941, and Tatiana changed her given name to an Americanized version to complement her new married last name – to be known as Tanna Dawson.

### **A Faith Ministry Through Tent Revivals**

After Al Dawson completed training at the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, he bought a tent and trailer. With the tent, the promise of \$30 a month from each of their home churches, and a tremendous amount of faith, the couple headed south to plant churches.

Their initial ministry was in South Carolina, where they started two churches. **To start the mission churches, Tanna and Al served side-by-side to visit homes, held home Bible studies, and conducted community outreach with children Bible clubs.** During the revival services, Tanna provided musical accompaniment during the song service and then Al would make an evangelistic presentation using chalk-talks. The couple decided to move to a warmer climate to conduct their tent ministry of church starting. Supported only by prayer and donations, the Lord led them to Tampa, Florida.

One night while leading revival services to start a new mission – that eventually became the North Rome Baptist Church – three Florida Baptist pastors were among the revival attendees. Impressed by the young evangelist’s preaching, they asked the novice church starter to join with Southern Baptists and to start the church as a Southern Baptist congregation. The Dawsons up to this point considered themselves independent Baptists – having come from the faith traditions of German Baptists and the Church of the Brethren. But after talking about the Bible and theology with the pastors, Al and Tanna agreed they were Missionary Baptists.

### **A. D. Dawson Appointed as Area Missionary**

Initially Al Dawson served in the Tampa Bay Baptist Association as an itinerant missionary and church starter. His effectiveness was noticed by the missions’ leadership of the Florida Baptist Convention who enlisted and over time assigned Dawson as an assistant missions’ superintendent, a rural district missionary, a city missionary for Jacksonville, and then as superintendent of missions for the Miami Baptist Association, which encompassed Dade and Broward counties.

Dawson moved to Broward County in 1953 to find a rural region overshadowed by its glitzy, older sibling to the south-Miami. **Throughout these early years, moving across Florida, Tanna continued to minister alongside Al as they sought to share the gospel with residents and work to establish mission churches.**

“I remember all those churches along the FEC railway track,” recalled Tanna Dawson (b. 1919; d. 2011), during a 2004 interview with Barbara Denman. “Deerfield, Pompano, Oakland Park. All of them had little wooden buildings. Pompano First was one of them, just a very small building.”

Dairy farms dotted the Broward County landscape where 80,000 people lived, three-fourths residing in Fort Lauderdale. Tanna and Al then moved up to Broward where Al was assigned as director of missions for a combined Palm Lake and Gulf Stream Baptist associations. The two associations separated in 1970 and Dawson continued in Gulf Stream, serving the region for more than 25 years.



Al Dawson was a church starter at heart. Prior to moving to Fort Lauderdale, he had started 18 missions in the Miami Association, and seven new congregations in Broward within a four-year span. While he could have served in the pastoral ministry, he felt his calling was to help churches gain a foothold in new communities to reach for Christ the burgeoning population.

### **Tanna Dawson's Missions' Commitment**

As his partner in the mission enterprise, Tanna Dawson continued her involvement in Florida missions even after her husband's death in 1979. She carried on his work, influencing many church starts – including by helping a new church in her mother's Ukrainian village and a Russian Ukrainian Evangelical Baptist Church in Hollywood.

**As the long-time director of the Gulf Stream Association Woman's Missionary Union, Tanna Dawson watched her "mission field" evolve into a region of many nations. "The world has come to Broward," Dawson once observed.** Within the boundaries of the Gulf Stream Association, Tanna Dawson led in ministry outreach and evangelism witness to Romanians, Nicaraguans, Russians, Hispanics, Chinese, Haitians and many more.

Her WMU ministry encompassed working with women of 16 different language groups in Broward County. With only English, Spanish and some Creole WMU curriculum, she taught the message of missions – support, prayer and outreach – and led as a role model.

For more than six decades Dawson continued to be as devoted to her mission field. When her husband died, she said, **"I knew it was not for me to retire, but to continue in the mission ministry of the Lord the rest of my life. I read in God's word that we should be faithful until the end."**

In March, 2004, the Gulf Stream Association opened a new ministry to offer Broward women a better life through personal enrichment opportunities, naming the facility The Tanna F. Dawson Women's Center in honor of the tireless missions' advocate. The center houses parenting, GED training and conversational English classes, as well as workshops in job preparation and computer skills. A food pantry and a "boutique" for women in need of work clothes were later added to the services.

### **A Mission's Legacy Beyond Broward County**

Dawson served with the Florida Woman's Missionary Union in almost every role, including five years – from 1974-1979 – as president of the Florida WMU.

In 1980, Dawson was elected second vice president of the Florida Baptist State Convention, one of only eight women to serve in that role in the entity's history. She served on the State Board of Missions for two six-year terms, and was elected as recording secretary during both of those terms. She also was elected to the Committee on Order of Business, including a stint as vice chairman.

From 1974-1979, Dawson was the first vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Woman's Missionary Union, leading conferences at Glorieta and Ridgecrest.

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Dawson served as WMU president when Vanita M. Baldwin (b. 1926; d. 2022) was elected as director of Florida Woman's Missionary Union in 1977. Across the years, the two became close friends and co-workers for the cause of missions.

**“God blessed our world when He gave us Tanna Dawson, a woman who truly walked with Her Lord. I was blessed to know her, serve with her in the kingdom of our Lord and to love her,” recalled Baldwin, who retired in 1991.**

“She had strong qualities of leadership and shared her gifts of training skills with women in the churches of the Florida Baptist Convention and across our nation. She selected and guided women in mission's education through WMU to the extent that today many of these women are serving in their churches and associations.” Tanna Dawson died February 1, 2011, in Ft. Lauderdale.

[RESOURCES: This narrative is based upon several articles originally written by Barbara L. Denman including one in 2011 upon the death of Tanna Dawson; and a 2019 article on Albert Dawson, published in the *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*. Other source documents included: Martha Trotter's *Faithful Servants*; and John Hillhouse's *They Came from Many Nations*.]