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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 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].

Joseph C. Coats An African-American Gospel Preacher

"Bring us your prostitutes, burglars, dopers, street people. We want them. We love them," pastor Joseph Coats once told a Miami area newspaper writer. "If we are going to change this community, we have to change the people."

The pastor's comment was more than a headline, it was a long-held and Bible-based belief that the New Testament church, and particularly his Glendale Missionary Baptist Church, had to practice what Jesus taught. **Keeping the focus upon Jesus Christ – through Bible preaching, Sunday school teaching and community outreach to the less than desirable people – powered the church to grow.** Under Pastor Coats' leadership legacy, Glendale Missionary Baptist Church grew to over 3,000 members from less than 120 in three decades.

Early Life and Finding God's Will

Born in rural Alamo, Georgia, on January 28, 1927, the father of Joseph C. Coats was Henry Coats and his mother was Daisy Bostic who by that time had three other children. His father Henry died in May, 1928. His mother re-married, by the time Joe Coats was three years old. Up until the early 1940s his blended family continued to live in Wheeler County, Georgia. At some point Coats and his mother moved to Miami where Joe attended and graduated from the George Washington Carver High School in 1944. During the next 20 years Coats worked in the grocery business. In 1949, at age 22, Joe Coats married Catherine Williams of Holly Hill, S.C. Over the next several years the couple had eight children born into the family, seven of which survived: five daughters and two sons.

Whether it was having a decent, steady job or being married, or perhaps it was his lifestyle, **but God was dealing with Joe Coats to cause him to take notice of his spiritual lifestyle.** "I used to shoot pool for a living. I played some poker. That was back in my early days. And I got saved – the Lord saved me – and I came into the church. That was my



early days,” Coats told the *Miami Herald* in 1984. “When I first made the transition, I had to stay away from my past habits. My former friends made very little of me. They kind of mocked me.”

Coats and his wife Catherine, began attending the Glendale Baptist Mission – located in South Miami’s Richmond Heights neighborhood – which had been organized in the home of Rev. James Harrington in April, 1963. In this setting, where Bible teaching was pastor Harrington’s forte, Coats came to more clearly understand spiritual things. **In this nurturing church environment, Joseph Coats came to understand that God had placed a calling upon him to enter the preaching ministry.**

Ordained to Preaching Ministry

Having demonstrated his commitment and spiritual growth, the church – which in 1965 incorporated as the Glendale Missionary Baptist Church – agreed to recognize his call to the ministry. He was ordained April 23, 1966. **Equipped with only his rudimentary Bible knowledge, Coats determined his calling was to be an evangelist. He likely recognized that, based upon his own life experiences of sin and salvation, he had a message that would relate to the people of Richmond Heights community and elsewhere.**

In the African-American church tradition, when a young man surrenders to the call of ministry – whether or not he receives formal educational training – his basic ministerial training involves being mentored and guided by an established senior pastor. It is in this role that a young man learns through oral tradition about the Bible and its message. Additionally, through observation, he learns not only how to preach, but how to conduct a worship service, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and generally how to “relate” to the church flock. But for Joseph Coats, his initial understanding of God’s call was to become an evangelist, not a church pastor.

Likely with the help of his pastor, Rev. James Harrington, opportunities were provided for Coats to preach in churches in the area and outside of the state. At some point, Joe Coats realized he needed training in the Bible and theology if he was going to be an effective instrument for God. Coats initially enrolled in the Southern Baptist Convention’s South Florida Seminary Extension program located in Miami. It provided courses of study that led to one of three certificates: pastoral training; religious education; and Christian life development. This entry level education eventually led Coats to earn a bachelor of theology degree from the Southern Bible Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri.

Building a Church to Serve the Community

And then, God opened another door for Joe Coats. The Glendale founding pastor James Harrington accepted a call to another church out of state. In September, 1964, the church turned to Rev. Bragg L. Turner, a former deacon ordained to the gospel ministry, to serve as pastor. At the time the church had no permanent facilities and met in people’s homes. **“We had Bible studies in one member’s home, and we didn’t have enough room inside the house. It was small, people would be outside around windows to hear the Bible being taught, sitting on porches, standing up in the doors,”** Coats recalled in a 1984 newspaper interview.

The increased attendance necessitated a larger facility and soon the church was holding weekly services in a vacated post office building and then moved to a nearby elementary school. The Bible studies continued in people’s homes. Meanwhile the church was raising and saving money to buy a church site of their own. Finally in 1966, the church purchased a tree-studded three-acre site in the shadow of the Florida Turnpike located at Southwest 117th Avenue, which at the time was still in a rural area of Dade County. Following the resignation of Pastor Turner, in December 3, 1967, “these people extended a call” to Coats to be their third pastor, which he accepted.

Pastor Coats and the band of approximately 120 members recognized God was blessing them with increasing numbers of people being drawn to the preaching of Pastor Coats and the emphasis upon Bible study groups. And as the membership grew the dream of building their own church sanctuary would not be realized for another four years. Finally on March 8, 1971, construction on the sanctuary began and by November the building was ready to host the congregation. **But Pastor Coats had a greater vision. That vision was to build, in time, not only a sanctuary, but a Sunday school facility and a community outreach center.** And by March 5, 1981, two additional buildings were completed and dedicated – a two-story educational building with 90 classrooms and an administration building with 30 classrooms and a fellowship hall.

Another vision Pastor Coats had to promote the spiritual and academic development of children was realized in August, 1984, when the Glendale Preschool Academy was opened. The charter school, which was open to the community, was in keeping with Rev. Coats' stated vision, to provide a Christian-oriented preschool "to teaching boys and girls the 'way of education' and the 'way of the cross.'"

Coats cultivated the Glendale church's community outreach, which was characterized by one writer as the "unofficial governing body of Richmond Heights community," in which most of the membership resided. "We're not too busy that we can't stop and help" people in need, Coats said in 1984. He further noted, "there's more here than just religious training." **The mission of the Glendale Church, under Coats leadership, was to spread the gospel through word and deed.** "The faithful take their message to the prisons, the airwaves and the street corners through more than a dozen outreach programs that go outside the church to the people," Peter Hamm of the *Miami Herald* reported. "I think that our outreach programs should be a model, and a lot of the churches don't go outside their own people," Coats said.

Sundays were for Spiritual Development

Sundays were a day devoted to the spiritual development of the Glendale members highlighted by the weekly energetic worship services led by Pastor Coats. Most Sundays began with age-group Bible studies followed by mid-morning worship services which continued well past 1:00 p.m. **Yet every available pew seat would be taken in a sanctuary designed for 500 persons, in addition to folding chairs that lined the aisles. During that worship time – which featured loud and uplifting music accompanied by piano, electric bass and tambourines – would lead up to the Bible-based and emotional sermon delivered by Coats.** A church member and magazine writer described Coats' preaching as being, "powerful, stirring sermons seasoned with simple, yet unique, analogies to his indescribable passion for God's Word and his people," Veronica Carey Buie reported.

Evangelistic Outreach

That focus of reaching people through evangelistic-based ministries and Bible teaching groups paid dividends in terms of growth. **During the three decades between the 1970s and the 1990s, Coats was baptizing on average 100 people per year. And by 1995, the church membership reached over 3,500 with 1,732 enrolled in Sunday school.** In addition to growing the Glendale Church, Pastor Coats led the church to sponsor the starting of six missions – some bearing the Glendale moniker (i.e., Glendale of Brownsville or Glendale of Immokalee) – and providing church members to serve as the nucleus for those missions. Additionally, Coats mentored and ordained at least eight young men who went from Glendale to organize as many churches from West Palm Beach to Maryland.

Crossing the Racial Divide

Without a doubt, one of the most significant actions made by Rev. Joseph Coats was his leadership to affirm unity and brotherhood by leading his church to become the first African-American congregation to affiliate with the Miami Baptist Association, an organization primarily composed of Anglo congregations. However, by 1968 the Miami Association was already culturally integrated, in

addition to the 67 Anglo churches and three Hispanic full-member congregations, but no African-American congregations. The Anglo churches sponsored an additional 23 Spanish missions, one Chinese language, one Hungarian language and one Slavic language missions. This reflected part of the multi-cultural diversity that was present in Dade County at the time.

The Glendale Missionary Baptist Church in 1969 applied for affiliation with the Miami Baptist Association. **In Southern Baptist polity once, a church is accepted into a Florida-based Baptist association as a cooperating member by its declared Baptist faith and practices, the church automatically became affiliated with the Florida Baptist State Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention.**

According to a *Miami Herald* newspaper account, the church's action to affiliate with Southern Baptists came "during the peak of the nation's civil rights struggle." The news account said Pastor Coats, "endured criticism from other black ministers and in some cases was ostracized. His fellow ministers objected to his reaching out to an organization that had staunchly supported racial segregation." Coats' own explanation for the move to join with Southern Baptists said, **"We simply taught Christ here – not black and white. I preached impartially and unity. And our members saw people as people,"** he told the *Miami Herald*.

Joseph C. Coats retired on January 31, 1997, after 30 years' service to the Glendale Church and continued to be active in the ministry until his health began to fail. He died March 2, 2002, at age 75.

[RESOURCES: The South Dade *News Leader*, April 12, 1982; *The Miami Herald*, May 19, 1983, February 13, 1984, February 16, 1984, March 29, 1984, May 5, 1984, December 23, 1984, January 7, 1993, and March 7, 2002; Church History of Glendale Missionary Baptist Church; *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Vol III*; *The Gospel Truth magazine*, March, 2002; Statistics from the *Florida Baptist Annuals* for the years 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985, and 1995; *Baptist Press*, August 28, 1992; Miami Baptist Association *Annual*, 1968, and 1969; Sid Smith, "A History of African-American Florida Baptists," *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, Vol. 2, 2000; and Donald S. Hepburn, "Joseph C. Coats – The Legacy of an African-American Preacher," *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, Vol. 21, 2019.]