

Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists

PO Box 95 ~ Graceville, Florida 32440

Telephone: 850-360-4179~ E-mail: society2@floridabaptisthistory.org ~ web: floridabaptisthistory.org

September 2023 – Volume 15, Number 9

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].

Ismael Negrin: Ministered to Hispanics in Cuba and Florida

In the late half of the twentieth century, the political plight of the nation of Cuba greatly impacted the work of the Florida Baptist State Convention as Miami and eventually South Florida became an open door for Cubans seeking asylum from revolutions and political upheavals that crippled the Caribbean country.

Ismael Negrin was one of the persons who helped pave the way for his fellow Cubans to make that transition from Cuba to the U.S. With his feet planted solidly in both nations – United States and Cuba – Negrin a missionary appointed to Cuba by the Home Mission Board (now known as the North American Mission Board) of the Southern Baptist Convention, served churches in both countries, winning converts and later helping these new Christian believers assimilate in their new American life. **And by his commitment and ministry efforts Negrin became a legacy leader among his Spanish language pastoral contemporaries and those that followed.**

A Dynamic and Evangelistic Pastor

The on-going political unrest in Cuba that began late in the nineteenth century, continued into the twentieth century. Again in 1933 Cubans were protesting the economic inequality fostered by the government. At the center of that political protest – speaking as an advocate for the poor – was Cuban missionary-pastor, Ismael Negrin who was serving as pastor of the Baptist church in Cruces, Cuba.



Dynamic, aggressive, evangelistic – such was the personality of Cuban missionary Negrin, who later served as one of the first Hispanic pastors to Florida churches in Key West, Tampa and Miami: The Cuban pastor sponsored big evangelistic events in Cruces, held community festivals, parades and started a Baptist school. “He was a ‘pack the pew’ kind of guy,” Miami Pastor David Lema explained. “He would get ideas from the United States and transfer them to Cuba. That was ‘nouvelle’ at that time.”

“Negrin was very evangelistic,” said renowned Cuban pastor Aurelio Travieso, who at one time was pastor of the Iglesias Bautista El Calvario, the largest Baptist congregation in Havana, and early leader of Hispanic work in Florida.

Antonio Ramos, who once served as associate pastor of the Renacer Spanish Iglesias of Pembroke Pines, was one of those whom Negrin led to the Lord and mentored in the ministry. During a three-year evangelistic movement spurred by Negrin, Ramos and others traveled to camps and other towns near Cruces, going house to house to share the gospel. The evangelistic effort resulted in 1,727 conversions, he said. Thirty of the men involved in the evangelistic effort would become pastors, many of them, such as Ramos and home missionary Anibal Espinosa, would serve later in Florida.

“A Bridge Builder” in Miami

Negrin’s bilingual ability served as a “bridge” for the Cuban Baptists, recalled David Lema, providing the transition that the Cubans and especially the pastors needed in their new country. “He was fluent and comfortable in both worlds,” Lema said, and spoke perfect English without an accent. His wife, Bessie, an Anglo from North Carolina, gave him an entree into the American society that few other Cubans could enjoy. “He knew how everything worked in the U.S. When pastors came over, he readily helped them,” Lema recalled. This group of pastors served as a network that jump-started Baptist work among the Hispanics in Miami. “They were the standard bearers,” said Lema. “They served as pastors of the largest churches in Cuba,” immigrating because of political pressure that led many of their fellow pastors to serve time in Castro’s prisons. **Their presence in Miami allowed Florida Baptists to aggressively start congregations to meet the influx of the Cuban refugees coming to the city after Castro took office.**

Negrin’s Early Years

A carpenter’s son, Negrin was born in Las Palma, Canary Islands, Spain, on April 22, 1899. At age five his family moved to Cuba where after settling in Guayos, he began attending the Baptist school there. After making a profession of faith in 1919, Negrin said he “at once felt the desire to preach the Gospel.” After attending the Colegio Cubano-Americano, he attended the Cuban Baptist Seminary and graduated in the last class before the seminary was closed in 1929.

Negrin was appointed as a missionary of the Home Mission Board on September 15, 1924 to work in Havana. In 1925, he married Bessie Harrill (b. March 23, 1900), a native of Lincolntown, North Carolina. Bessie had been serving as a missionary to Havana for the Home Mission Board since 1920, teaching school and performing evangelistic work.

“They were very unique,” recalled daughter Ann Negrin Garcia. **“My father had a tremendous vision of the work and my mother was a doer of the work and the Lord blessed abundantly.** Everything they started multiplied and multiplied beyond imagination.”

An Initial Ministry in Tampa

From 1927 to 1929, the Home Mission Board assigned the couple to Tampa to begin a goodwill ministry center in Ybor City, a Tampa suburb where Cubans lived and worked in the cigar industry. The Southern Baptist Good Will Center sought to provide Bible-centered and Christ-centered activities built around the needs of the Hispanic community by providing nursery school and kindergarten; classes in Bible study, adult education, and homemaking, among other ministries.

As pastor of the predominately Hispanic Clark Memorial Baptist Church in Ybor City, Negrin led weekly worship services and did evangelistic outreach. In addition to her homemaking responsibilities, Bessie worked in the goodwill center teaching children and teaching the Bible to the women. The couple only worked in the center for two years before returning to Cuba in 1931 where they were re-appointed by the Home Mission Board to Cruces. By now the couple had two children. A son Ismael, Jr. who was born before they left Cuba. And their daughter, Ann, was born while they were serving in Ybor City.



Evangelistic Ministry at Cruces, Cuba

The Negrins' return to Cruces began a long, creative and evangelistic ministry that resulted in hundreds of converts to Christ, as well as men and women called out for vocational Christian service. During their ministry, Sunday school attendance at Cruces grew from 36 in 1931 to more than 200 in 1940. The Negrins started Bible studies in nearby communities, engaging more than 500 persons in worship each week. In 1939, the Iglesias Bautista at Cruces, baptized 21 new converts, making it third highest in the number of baptisms in the Western Cuba Baptist Convention.

A Return to Ministry in Key West

In 1947, the Negrins were appointed by the Home Mission Board to help assist missionary Mary A. Taylor at the Good Will Center in Key West. Upon this entry into the U.S., Negrin applied for and was granted naturalization as a United States citizen. The couple worked with resident missionary Taylor, who had started and directed the center since 1940, and which was the first Hispanic work in South Florida.

Following an evangelistic revival conducted by Abdiel Silva of Tampa, several Hispanics were baptized at the First Baptist Church, Key West. These new converts were the nucleus of the Hispanic mission congregation established by the Home Mission Board to reach the increasing Spanish population. Negrin was designated as pastor of the mission church, where Ismael and Bessie served for the next 14 years.

Assigned to Miami Church

The post-Castro era exodus of a new generation of Cuban refugees into Florida took the family to Miami in 1959, where they were poised to help the Cuban families relocate in Florida. The Negrins were assigned to Miami where he became director of the Spanish department (as how the early ministry to Hispanics was organized within existing predominately Anglo congregations) at Stanton Memorial Baptist Church. The influx of Cubans and other Hispanics into the neighborhoods around the church, in time, became “the heart of Miami’s Spanish-speaking community,” *The Miami News* reported.

Part of that resettlement was encouraged by the welcoming ministries offered by the Miami church. The couple started a Hispanic kindergarten which “attracted many parents seeking a place for their children,” Garcia recalled. Again, using his flair for the dramatic, Negrin started a refugee choir which attracted much attention locally and drew many Hispanics to church to hear the group, she recalled. **On April 5, 1965, after serving 45 years with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in both Cuba and Florida, the Negrins retired from the Stanton Memorial congregation.**

In their retirement years, the Negrins returned to Key West where they continued evangelistic work and volunteering in their church home. Bessie died on Feb. 11, 1977, after a fall while preparing boxes for the elderly residing in the county home. Negrin moved back to Miami, remarried and died July 25, 1983. He and Bessie are both buried in Key West.

Calling Ismael Negrin “an unsung hero in the pages of our Florida Baptist history,” Lema said, “He made a difference behind the scenes.”

[RESOURCES: Barbara L. Denman, "Ismael Negrin: Laid Foundations for Florida Baptists' Hispanic Congregations," Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage, Vol. 21, 2019; Florida Baptist Witness on May 18, 2005; Gerald E. Poyo, "Key West and the Cuban Ten Years War," The Florida Historical Quarterly, Vol. 57 (January, 1979), issue 3, 290; W. L. Mahon, "Origin of Cuban Baptist Missions," Florida Baptist Witness, March 2, 1898, 1; State Board of Missions, Minutes, January 3, 1883; December 14, 1884; November 14, 1885; and January 5, 1886; Telephone interviews with: David Lema, Hialeah, Florida, in November, 2004; and Antonio Ramos, Miami, Florida, in November, 2004; Information from Negrin's official Home Mission Board biographical sketch, undated, in the files of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida; Letter to writer from Ann Negrin Garcia, dated December 24, 2004, postmarked from Austin, Texas; Loyd Corder, "Goodwill Center Work," Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Vol. 1, Nashville: Broadman Press, 1958, 569-570; Ismael Negrin letter to Una Roberts Lawrence, undated, HMB archives; Milton S. Leach, Jr., "Florida Baptist Hispanic Heritage: 1950 – 1988," The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage, Volume 2, Fall 2000, 42; and "Minister Retiring," The Miami News, March 20, 1965, 5A.]