

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 2025, the LEGACY monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of those men who have been elected by the State Board of Missions to lead the Florida Baptist Convention. Whether designated as the Corresponding Secretary or the Executive Director-Treasurer, each of these men have left a legacy upon the corporate mission enterprise of Florida Baptists.

Charles Mercer Brittain: Faithful, Compassionate, Conciliatory, Progressive

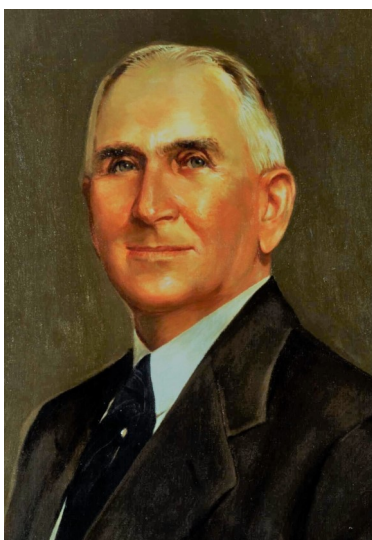
In a State Board of Missions presentation made during the opening session of the Florida Baptist State Convention on January 14, 1942, retired Secretary-Treasurer Charles M. Brittain was characterized as a Baptist on principle, faithful in service, compassion in soul, conciliatory in temperament, and progressive in outlook. That observation was in recognition of Mercer's executive leadership from 1926 to 1941.

A native of Conyers, Georgia, Charles Mercer Brittain (b. December 16, 1873), grew up in a Christian family. His father – Ida Callaway Brittain – was a farmer and bi-vocational pastor who served several parttime churches in the state. At the age of 16, Charles moved to Atlanta. During the next four years he worked in a large dry goods store, until he received God's call to the ministry. In 1894 he enrolled in Mercer University and earned an A.B. degree. He then attended The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for one session and in December, 1899 was ordained. The following year, on June 27, 1900, Brittain married Susan Marie Moore (b. 1879; d.1947). Between 1902 and 1916 the couple had five sons.

Service in Y.M.C.A. Ministry

While attending Mercer University, Brittain got involved in the Young Men Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.). For his part, Brittain was drawn to the group because of their emphasis on the moral, spiritual, mental, social and physical condition of young men. Participation in the organization during his university years influenced him to have a greater heart for missionary work, Brittain later recalled.

On the day of his graduation from Mercer, he received a telegram inviting him to go to Tampa, Florida, to accept a position with the Army Christian Commission – a subsidiary of the Y.M.C.A. – which was ministering to some of the 40,000 troops awaiting deployment to fight in the Spanish-American War. **Brittain assisted in leading worship services and providing spiritual counseling to the soldiers.** Once the deployment began, Brittain and his fellow missionaries sailed with the troops to Cuba. They camped on the hills of Santiago to minister to the sick and dying. After the short-lived war, the troops and the missionaries returned to the United States.



Brittain's Ministry Service and Teaching

Between July 1902 and October 1905, Brittain served as pastor of McDonough Baptist Church (Central Association), Georgia. After eight years as pastor and high school teacher in Georgia, he moved to Florida. He served as pastor at First Church, Kissimmee (1905-1906) and at First Church, Lake City (1908-1911). While in Lake City the Florida Baptist State Convention founded Columbia College and elected Brittain among the charter trustees of the school.

He then received a pastoral call to a church in Alabama where he served for just two years. Brittain returned to Florida to teach – history, philosophy and Bible – at Columbia College and served as business manager of the institution. The school conferred up on him the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree.

During his years at Columbia College, Brittain concurrently served two years as editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness* and continued contributing to the paper afterward. Between 1915-1917, Brittain served as pastor of First Church, High Springs. When the college closed in 1918, he served a year (1919-1920) as pastor at First Church, Ocala.

Moving to Convention Leadership Post

While serving the Ocala church, S. B. Rogers invited Brittain to join him in Jacksonville to serve as the assistant secretary-treasurer. The growing demands of the secretary-treasurer's job and the associated travel was taking a toll on Rogers' emotional and physical well-being. The addition of Brittain spread-out the tasks to be done. In this role, Brittain was able to gain a broader understanding on all the mission and ministry tasks performed by the Convention in aiding churches and church leadership. The role also increased Brittain's visibility and interaction among pastors and laity across the state.

The untimely death of Rogers' wife Daisy in October, 1925, just added to Rogers' emotional trauma. In January, 1926, he announced to the State Board of Missions, his intention to retire by year's end. Unfortunately, within a month, Rogers experienced a stroke that necessitated hospitalization. Rogers died August 16, 1926. **The State Board at their December meeting turned to the "heir apparent" and elected Brittain as the fourth Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the state convention.**

New Challenges Confront Brittain

Now carrying the mantle of executive secretary-treasurer, Brittain immediately faced several economic crises. Shortly, before his State Board election, a devastating hurricane struck September 17, 1926, roaring across southern Florida between Miami and Fort Lauderdale and west into the Gulf of Mexico. **Its 124 plus miles per hour winds destroyed or damaged 28 Florida Baptist churches in the South Florida area** and created economic disaster in other communities. Official estimates at the time noted 20,000 homes and an untold number of businesses were damaged or destroyed, leaving 50,000 people homeless. The combined property loss value was estimated at \$160,000,000.

No sooner had the unnamed hurricane cleared the state than C. M. Brittain immediately took a south-bound train from Jacksonville to Miami. There he was met by C. B. Gaize who, drove Brittain through the storm ravaged areas to personally inspect the damaged church facilities. "We wanted to get first-hand knowledge," Brittain later reported in the *Witness*, "in order that we might inform our people just how badly damaged our church property was, so that we might intelligently formulate some plans for helping immediately the various congregations affected." **That act of responding to the site of a natural disaster's devastation upon churches was the first such tour made by any Florida Baptist executive secretary.** Soon thereafter, the State Board authorized its first - ever allocation for disaster relief efforts. It borrowed \$15,000 (\$270,408 in 2025 dollars) to contribute to the affected churches and set a goal to raise \$25,000 (\$450,680 in 2025 dollars) for relief efforts. Recovery was slow.

And yet, no sooner had South Florida Baptists recovered from the 1926 storm, nearly two years to the day, another hurricane struck on September 16, 1928. This time West Palm Beach and the areas west to Lake Okeechobee, were seriously affected. The powerful 130-miles per hour hurricane winds killed 2500 people and inflicted property loss estimated at \$75 million. **Twelve Florida Baptist churches were either completely destroyed or seriously damaged.**

In 1929, a new, more daunting financial, social and spiritual storm in the form of the Great Depression hit the entire country. The State Board of Missions had already needed to borrow money to meet its obligations, but after the stock market crashed, they had to cut back on its work that included reducing personnel particularly the subsidized pastor-missionaries and financial assistance to churches.

Spiritual Inertia Turned into Evangelistic Opportunities

Between 1920 and 1939 Florida's population almost doubled, growing to 1,897,414 from 968,470. The greatest increase came between 1920 and 1930 with a 51.6 percent growth. Brittain was concerned with what he viewed as a spiritual inertia that had become widespread among Florida Baptist churches. Baptist Historian John Rosser reported that Brittain was decrying the fact, "We have about 200 churches [out of approximately 800] in the state, calling themselves missionary Baptists . . . who never support any work of the denomination." He also expressed concern over "inferior pastoral service to many rural churches caused discouragement and depression in the churches."

Fortunately, many Baptists stayed focused upon reaching more people through evangelistic means. **And one of the most successful means for making new converts and disciplining Baptists was the Sunday school's Bible teaching ministry.** This resulted in the breaking of Sunday school attendance records that made previous statistics seem insignificant. The State Board stimulated a renewed emphasis upon evangelism by using third party gift funds to underwrite the employment of two statewide evangelists.

Meanwhile, to accommodate their worship and educational needs Florida Baptists began constructing some of the largest church buildings in the state. That inevitable necessity also proved to have a negative side, as delineated by Brittain. "Many of our larger churches have found themselves in very embarrassing situations due to their building programs in the midst of prevailing financial conditions," he observed in December, 1927.

The decade long in-state migration between 1930 and 1940 presented new challenges for both city and rural churches. For city congregations it was the evangelistic challenge and ministry opportunities created by the swelling numbers of new residents. **"The growth of our cities constitutes one of our most difficult problems," Brittain reported to the 1941 annual State Convention meeting.** Noting the lack of financial resources to undertake Convention-sponsored evangelistic efforts, Brittain declared that local churches needed to be more missions-conscious. He encouraged local churches to proclaim the gospel by organizing "mission schools" and "establishing preaching stations" in the newly developing city neighborhoods. Those efforts proved beneficial to many city churches.

By the time Brittain had reached age 60 in 1933, he, like his predecessor, experienced a variety of health problems that at one point required a three-month period of recuperation. But by September Brittain was back on the job and publicly expressing concerns about the \$16,000 deficit in Cooperative Program receipts needed to meet budget requirements. An on-going push by some pastors was for the state convention to establish a state convention-operated hospital. Despite after nearly a decade of false starts and studies, the dream was never realized due to the lack of funds. However, several local Baptist associations took up the cause and, in the years later, local Baptist

hospitals were organized and built. **To his credit, Brittain championed the convention's financial commitment to participate in the newly established SBC ministers' retirement fund to benefit pastors.** And he also worked to increase funding for tuition assistance for Baptist students.

Unfortunately, the health issues afflicting Brittain continued into the 1940s. As a result, in 1941 Brittain resigned his position and was elected secretary treasurer-emeritus. He died at Ft. Myers on January 12, 1943.

[**RESOURCES:** *Florida Baptist Annual*, 1941; John L. Rosser, *A History of Florida Baptists*, (1949); Lulrick Balzora, "Charles M. Brittain: Steadfast in Adversity, Executive Secretary-Treasurer, Florida Baptist Convention, 1926 – 1941," *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, Fall, 2004; Charles M. Brittain, "Early Experiences in Florida, No. 1 of a series of articles, *Florida Baptist Witness*, 1941; Edward Earl Joiner, *A History of Florida Baptists*, (1972).]