

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 H. Bolton, A Pastor at Heart and Experienced Denominational Leader

Charles Houston Bolton came to the leadership post of Florida Baptists with the unique combined experiences as a pastor and denominational employee. These contributed to his selection as the fifth executive secretary-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention and served from 1941 to 1944. Bolton holds the distinction of having served the shortest length of time – three years and 15 days – of any Florida executive secretary-treasurer.

A native of Belgreen, Alabama, Charles Bolton was born September 13, 1886, to dirt-farmer parents. At age 18, Bolton married his childhood sweetheart Lena Mae Painter (b. 1885; d. 1979) on September 20, 1904. The couple had three children named Charles, Jr. (b. 1912), Elinor Lyle (b. 1919), and Edith Annett (b. 1923).

Although the historical record is lost, at some point Bolton felt the call of God to enter the ministry. Pursuing that call at age 26, he attended Atlanta Theological Seminary (1912-14) and then The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1915-17). During his years at the Louisville seminary and continuing through 1939, Charles Bolton served as a pastor in Kentucky, Alabama and Florida.

The Challenges at West Palm Beach

In 1927, Bolton was called as pastor of First Baptist Church, West Palm Beach, Florida. The church, at the time, was experiencing serious financial difficulties. The church had recently constructed a wood frame “church tabernacle” that could accommodate 3,000 persons, although the church’s official membership was less than 900. Bolton was expected to lead the church to reduce its sizeable financial debt of \$167,000.

No sooner had C. H. Bolton begun to lead the church membership to making a significant reduction in its debt, than the great Hurricane of 1928 struck and the debt-laden tabernacle was destroyed. To recover from a devastating natural disaster was significant in and of itself. But the effort to raise financial resources to pay off debt and rebuild was hindered initially by the failure of the return by many of the church’s winter visitors, who had provided much of the church’s financial support. And before too long, with the crash of the New York Stock Exchange in October, 1929, additional financial woes and economic turmoil came with the onset of America’s Great Depression.



Providentially, the economic depression and slow-paced building program certainly did not distract from the church's mission of reaching people for Jesus Christ. The church membership grew by 39 percent in a dozen years to 1,438 from 876. And mission giving increased by 22 percent with the church contributing over \$2,400 through the Cooperative Program by the year 1938. And the church was debt free with the dedication of its new building in 1939.

Service with SBC Annuity Board

After 12 years-service at the Florida pastorate – in May, 1939 – Bolton resigned to accept his first appointment to denominational service. The Southern Baptist Convention's Relief and Annuity Board (now GuideStone Financial Resources) extended an invitation to Bolton to serve as what was then called associate secretary of the Board (which today would probably be comparable to the position of vice president).

Service with the Relief and Annuity Board was short-lived. By 1941, Bolton was ready to resign. Apparently, Bolton – who later wrote a letter of explanation sent to a friend – said he had viewed the opportunity as a transition to become the executive leader of the agency. But that failed to happen.

Seeking a New Secretary-Treasurer

Meanwhile back in Florida, on May 7, 1941, the Executive Committee of the State Board of Missions convened to learn that Dr. Charles M. Brittain, after 15 years of service was resigning as executive secretary-treasurer of the Board. Brittain cited a heart condition that was providing “only half of my original heart power left after the years of strenuous service that I have given to my and your work. . .”

Upon learning of Brittain's decision, the Board members wasted little time at the same meeting to have a time of prayer and accept nominations for a replacement executive secretary-treasurer. After two written ballots, the Board made a final unanimous vote for Bolton, who had been nominated by a friend. **With little fanfare, and by July 25, 1941, Charles Houston Bolton began service as the fifth executive secretary-treasurer of the State Board of Missions.**

Service During World War II

In January, 1942, when Bolton made his first report to the State Convention on the work of the State Board of Missions, the United States had entered World War II as a result of the December 7 attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. Bolton reported to the State Convention that, **“Trying times demand strong men. Today offers scant room for weaklings. We must ‘quit ourselves like men’ and witness in our daily living to the presence and power of the Spirit of our Blessed Lord.”**

Despite the implications of the war, Bolton praised Florida Baptists for their increased missions giving and chided them for the decrease in baptisms during the prior year. He reminded everyone of the great missions' challenge that existed within the state. **“There are literally scores of places where new churches ought to be organized. Many places should have missions' set-up and manned by the churches nearby. An enlarged enlistment program should be inaugurated,” Bolton stressed.** And he called upon churches to provide religious services to assist chaplains serving in the growing number of Florida military posts.

Concern for Church Staff's Dignified Retirements

In part as a result of his prior service with the Annuity Board, Bolton expressed concern over “entirely too little being given as relief to our aged infirmed ministers and their families.” He called upon churches to take quarterly offerings to provide financial assistance to those pastors who did not benefit from funds from the SBC Relief and Annuity Board.

Following up on his concern over the financial insecurity of retired ministers, Bolton also rallied behind the cause of former pastors who were then serving as war-time military chaplains. **Two years later – April 25, 1944 – the Board approved a recommendation by Bolton to include church secretaries, educational directors and song leaders in the Ministers Retirement Plan administered by the SBC Relief and Annuity Board.**

Assisting in the Start of Mission Churches

During Bolton's brief tenure, much of his attention and actions revolved around leading the State Board of Missions in securing financial assistance in the: starting of new mission churches; providing loans to churches; and granting pastoral salary assistance to mission church pastors. In his quarterly reports to the State Board, Bolton often noted that despite a war economy, Cooperative Program gifts were exceeding budget requirements. This infusion of extra cash helped pay off some of the debt carried forward from the Depression years, including a mortgage on the state office building known as the Rogers Building.

In addition to those accomplishments, there was at least one significant action that had long-term implications for the State Convention. **This was the initiation of a partnership between the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and the State Convention to jointly participate in the metropolitan mission work within Florida.** Up until the mid-1940s the State Board of Missions earmarked funds to employ field missionaries to direct and develop the starting of new mission work across the state. These missionaries generally were assigned to the metropolitan areas with the greatest population growth. But the employment and assignment of these Florida field missionaries were limited by available Cooperative Program receipts.

By 1943 Home Mission Board (now known as the North American Mission Board) leadership began serious negotiations with C. H. Bolton to develop by 1944 a jointly-funded city missions' program. The agreement provided that funding of the program would be on a fifty-fifty shared basis, while supervision of the mission personnel would be "under the complete jurisdiction of the State Secretary." **This was a significant development in how the State Convention would do the task of missions' outreach within Florida for years to come.**

The Pastorate was Bolton's First Love

C. H. Bolton resigned from his post as executive secretary-treasurer during the April 25, 1944 meeting of the State Board of Missions. In a letter read to the Board, Bolton noted that he had "an active love for the pastorate." He went on to explain that he had served in denominational work for five years and now "under what I trust is the leadership of the Holy Spirit" was resigning. He announced plans to accept the call of the Riverside Baptist Church in Miami as pastor. The Board responded by approving a motion filled "with the deepest sort of regrets and yet with great joy in his following what he believes to be God's leadership."

Service with the Miami church lasted for five years until 1949. During those years, the Riverside Church experienced a seven percent increase in membership to a high of 2,357 while averaging 95 baptisms per year and their mission gifts through the Cooperative Program increased 18 percent.

Brief Return to Denominational Service

The call and opportunity to return to Southern Baptist Convention agency service was presented to Bolton in February, 1949, when the directors of the Southern Baptist Foundation in Nashville offered him the opportunity to become the agency's first executive secretary. Bolton began his work the following May, and served until January 1, 1953.

A Return to the Pastorate and 40 Interims

Charles Bolton made one final career change that served as a transitional phase in his own life. At age 67 Bolton retired from the SBC agency post to return to the pastorate. He returned to Florida to serve as pastor of the First Baptist Church, Avon Park, where he served 1953-1956. **At age 70, Charles Bolton was determined not to sit still in retirement. Before his death on November 11, 1973, at age 87, Bolton served as interim pastor in 40 churches.** At the time of his death Bolton was living in Thomasville, Georgia, but was buried in Oaklawn Cemetery in Jacksonville, Florida.

Throughout his ever-changing professional career, Charles H. Bolton remained popular among Florida Baptists. That was due, in part, because of his reputation as having statesman qualities, which one pastor said was characterized by Bolton's "bold frankness."

[**RESOURCES:** *The History of First Baptist Church of West Palm Beach* (2001); Charles H. Bolton, personal correspondence, March 17, 1973; Minutes, [May 7, 1941, March 3, 1942, March 12, 1943, January 25, 1944, April 25, 1944], State Board of Missions; 1941 Florida Baptist Annual; *Florida Baptist Witness*, July 13, 1944; 70th Anniversary observance, Riverside Baptist Church, Miami, (1991); 1949 *Miami Baptist Association Annual*, Statistical Table; *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Vol. I*, (1958); and Donald S. Hepburn "Lifetime Service as a Transitional Leader: Charles H. Bolton, Executive Secretary-Treasurer, Florida Baptist Convention 1941 – 1944," *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, 2004.]