

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.

John Sullivan – From Coal Miner’s Son To Baptist Leader/Statesman [Part 2 of 2-parts]

As noted in the September issue of LEGACY, Travis Gene “John” Sullivan, served as the Florida Baptist Convention’s executive director-treasurer from 1989 to 2015. He holds the distinction of being the longest serving executive leading the State Board of Missions through a record 26 years. Such a Legacy required a two-part installment narrative on the life and ministry of John Sullivan. This is part two.

Initial Ministry in Local Churches

Sullivan once told writer Bryan McAnally, that his 11 years enrolled in Southwestern Seminary provided three lessons which had benefitted him throughout his ministry: **“First, preaching is both a gift and a skill. Hard work is required to accomplish your potential, and I’m still learning. Secondly, I learned to pay attention and learn all that I could, because at one time or another, I’ve used it. Third, I learned that the ministry is never a career – it is always a calling.”**



Between the time he acquired his first degree in 1965 from Southwestern Seminary and his 1989 election to lead the Florida Baptist Convention, John Sullivan had served as fulltime pastor of five churches in his ministry. These included: 27th Avenue Church in Phoenix, Arizona, (1959-1962); First Church of Aledo, Texas, (1962-1967); Ridglea West Church in Fort Worth, Texas, (1967-1971); First Church of Sulphur Springs, Texas, (1971-1975); and Broadmoor Church, Shreveport, Louisiana, (1975-1989).

During his 13 years as pastor of the 5,700-member Broadmoor Church, Sullivan led the congregation to quadruple its budget, Cooperative Program giving and missions giving. The congregation averaged 132 baptisms per year and by 1988 was sending 17 percent of its budget through the Southern Baptist Convention’s Cooperative Program.

Elected as the Ninth Executive Director

Sullivan was elected as the ninth executive director-treasurer of the Florida Convention on January 20, 1989, as the unanimous choice of the State Board of Missions' search committee. During the forty-minutes' question and answer period with the State Board of Mission's members, Sullivan shared his ministry vision for Florida. **"My dream, my vision, my hope for Florida Baptists is that we would find that the people would become such a burden to us that we would have no option but to take the gospel to them."** He went on to stress, "My vision is to strengthen the churches God has given us, and at the same time plant new churches where we can reach new people for Christ," he said. It was a commitment that he diligently sought to fulfill leading Florida Baptists.

As Sullivan made the transition from being the pastor of the Broadmoor Baptist Church, to executive director-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention, his missiology had to transition as well - not necessarily his understanding of mission, but his role. Sullivan helped churches realize that gospel opportunities often come through times of crisis, in planning and implementing strategy to accomplish missions.

As executive-director, Sullivan called Florida Baptists to three core principles—evangelism without apology, planting New Testament churches, and developing healthy congregations. **"He embraced church growth strategies and helped Florida Baptist church leaders understand and implement growth principles as momentum in the Church Growth Movement began to make an impact in Southern Baptist life,"** explained Michael Tatum in an article he wrote about Sullivan. "His missiology would be further developed as he responded to humanitarian needs through disaster relief efforts and expanded Florida's area of responsibility to include the island nations Haiti and Cuba."

His tenure marked significant growth for Florida Baptists, their churches and together they:

- planted 2,500 new churches and church-type missions;
- baptized 779,391 persons;
- gave \$670 million through the Cooperative Program to support Southern Baptist mission and ministry causes and led the convention in 1990 and 1991 to achieve a 50-50 percent distribution of CP income between Florida and the SBC;
- and gave \$20,600,000 for Florida missions through the Maguire State Mission Offering;
- established 14 mission partnerships including 20-year commitments with the Western Cuba Baptist Convention and the Confraternite Missionnaire Baptiste d'Haiti, which grew from a nucleus of 60 churches to 2,302 churches and missions; and a later partnership with the Eastern Cuba Baptist Convention;
- sent 385,000 Florida Baptists on Convention-sponsored volunteer mission and ministry projects;
- responded to Hurricane Andrew in South Florida in 1992, one of the most destructive storms of its time. Sullivan and Convention staff lived in the affected communities for nearly six weeks, sleeping on church floors and setting up a long-term church rebuilding program;
- responded to every natural disaster in the state since Andrew, and many in other states and nations, training nearly 40,000 disaster relief volunteers;
- established nine theological education centers in the state where 900 students were enrolled in the state's program; and
- expanded the convention's specialty program and ministry resources to serve ethnic, language, and African-American churches; as well as undertaking aggressive church planting of ethnic, language and Anglo mission congregations.

Needless to say, each of those benchmarks deserve extended explanations. Unfortunately, the space limitations of this issue of LEGACY will not make that possible. **However, it is noteworthy that during his 26 years of ministry service Sullivan led Florida Baptists and their churches to increased outreach and financial support for the Kingdom's causes.**

Nancy Sullivan: Encourager and Helpmate

John and Nancy Sullivan were married 65 years during which time Nancy Sullivan was his companion, his helpmate in the truest sense of the word, and the person who led him to Christ in the months after their marriage (see September LEGACY). Few conversations with John Sullivan would end without the mention of the love of his life. And few sermons have not included mention of Nancy's role in leading John Sullivan to make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. **"It's an amazing thing for God to call a boy out of the coal fields of West Virginia, [and] meet someone as wonderful as Nancy," Sullivan often said.**

Nancy Hinson Sullivan (b. 1936; d. 2020), was born with a twin sister in Jonesboro, Arkansas. As mentioned in the previous issue of LEGACY, Nancy and John met in Washington, D.C., fell in love and married in 1955. The Sullivans had three children before and during the years John Sullivan was pursuing his educational degrees: a son John Michael (b. 1957); daughters Cheryl Ann (b. 1960) and Jeanie (b. 1967). Nancy preceded John Sullivan in death, at age 84, after a brief hospitalization in 2020.

Soon after Sullivan accepted the Convention leadership role, Nancy saw her role to be more than just "John's wife." **Nancy Sullivan set about to carve a niche of her own as she traveled around the state with her husband, and in her own right leading conferences and encouraging women.** Mrs. Sullivan carried a burden for "hurting pastors' wives." She often said that she saw herself in the role of the biblical Barnabas, an encourager. "As a pastor's wife for 32 years, I want to say it can be great. We have great memories of every church we have ever served." As a result, she developed and led pioneering conferences to meet the needs of ministers' wives.

During his 26-year Convention tenure, John Sullivan and his wife, Nancy, drove over a million miles, visiting churches, as he led revivals and spoke at conferences. He preached 5,859 times, averaging 234 times a year, in 3,067 locations. Sullivan spent 4,128 nights at home and 5,003 nights in hotels on the road.

Southern Baptist Convention Leadership

Sullivan was a recognized statesman within the Southern Baptist Convention, having served as first vice president 1982-1984; while concurrently serving as a member of the Executive Committee, 1980-1988. However, during the height of the SBC controversy between conservatives and moderates, Sullivan served on the Convention-appointed Peace Committee, 1986-1988. In 1997, Sullivan was appointed to a 15-member committee assigned to produce a 1998 SBC Convention-approved amendment on the Family that was subsequently added to the 1963 *Baptist Faith and Message*.

His fierce belief that the transacting of God's business – whether in the local church or a convention – should "be done decently and in order" (I Cor. 14:40) resulted in his appointment as one of the several parliamentarians who served during the SBC annual meetings from 1986 to 2012. During those years, Sullivan achieved the status of a Certified Parliamentarian recognized by the American Institute of Parliamentarians. **Such experiences and training benefitted many Florida Baptist churches that called upon Sullivan to mediate business meetings and church conflicts.**

Ministry Service In "Retirement"

After his retirement from the Florida Baptist Convention in February 2015, within weeks he was called by the First Baptist Church, Jacksonville, to serve as pastor to senior adults. He held that post for eight years from April 2015 to November 2023. In January 2, 2024, he began service as associate pastor to senior adults at the Broadmoor Baptist Church, Shreveport, La., a position in which he currently serves at age 89.

Perhaps John Sullivan's personal self-assessment made in a 2006 oral history interview summed up his ministry: **"When I stand in the judgment before God and have to give an account of what I've done, I hope the Father will say to me, 'Sullivan you didn't do everything right, but any mistake you made was a mistake of the head and not of the heart. You maintained your integrity; you told the gospel story and that's all I ever called you to do.' The greatest joy of my life is getting to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ,"** Sullivan said.

[RESOURCES: Barbara Denman and Greg Warner, "John Sullivan Elected Unanimously," Florida Baptist Witness, January 26, 1989, 3-4; Bryan McAnally, "Commitment to Growth," Southwestern News, Vol. 54, #4, Summer, 1996, 36-37; Barbara Denman, "John Sullivan, Statesman, Honored for Serving Florida Baptists 25 Years," Florida Missions Today, Summer, 2014, 8-11.; Donald S. Hepburn, oral history interview with John Sullivan, conducted in December, 2006; Michael A. Tatum, "T. G. "John" Sullivan – The Legacy of a Denominational Servant-Leader," The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage, Vol. 21, 2019; Thomas Kinchen, "Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention, 1989 to Present," The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage, Vol. 6, 2004.]