

Robert V. Roberts (1947-) was born in Wauchula, Florida. He graduated from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and Luther Rice Seminary. Roberts served as director of missions for the South Florida Baptist Association 1989-2013. He and his wife, Brenda K. Roberts had two sons.

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## Worship services begin to vary

By Patricia Merritt

The Ledger

Verses of "Amazing Grace" or "How Great Thou Art" can be heard in worship services of many Southern Baptist churches.

And now more contemporary choruses such as "Mighty Is Our God" and "Bless the Name of Jesus" are also taking their turn in Southern Baptist congregations.

Worship styles are becoming more varied in Baptist churches across the country, says the Rev. Robert Roberts, director of missions for the South Florida Baptist Association in Lakeland.

"There once was a time if you raised your hands in worship service or didn't sing songs out of the Baptist hymnal, then you weren't Baptist. Those things have changed," says the Rev. Michael Hailey, former pastor at First Baptist Church in Lakeland, where there is a blended form of worship. Hailey is now pastor at Summer Grove in Shreveport, La.

The majority of Southern Baptist churches are still considered traditional in their worship service. Roberts defines traditional services as singing old hymns such as "Amazing Grace," scripture reading, a sermon and an offering.

Evolving in Baptist services are also the blended and nontraditional services, Roberts says.

Nontraditional is the least common. They include the singing of choruses that are not hymns, Roberts says. Sermons are more-contemporary and deal with social issues. And there's the offering.

"Baptists always take an offering," he says.

Roberts classifies Celebration Baptist Worship Center in Lakeland as a nontraditional-worship-styled SBC church.

The Rev. Gerald Bagwell, pastor at Celebration, calls his church innovative.

"We have real freedom for individuals to express themselves in worship," says Bagwell, who started the

church in March 1992. He was a former pastor at First Baptist in Lakeland from 1978 to 1986.

"We meet in different care groups on Sunday nights in peoples' homes. We stress people and their needs, not programs," Bagwell says. "We don't have the excess baggage of tradition."

But they do have the convention's blessings, he says.

"As an innovative church we're not negative to others and don't believe we're the only ones doing things for God," Bagwell says. His church has a membership of 140.

The SBC seems to be more open to "innovative" churches, he says. And Bagwell projects that in the next 10 years there will be more innovative congregations in the convention.

Another form of worship style is using both the traditional and nontraditional to make the blended service, Roberts says. This form of worship service is second to the traditional one, he says.

**MONDAY PROFILE**  
**THE REV. ROBERT ROBERTS**

**In Recognizing His True Calling, He Is Fulfilling His Service Mission**

By **CARY McMULLEN**  
Ledge Religion Editor

**LAKELAND**  
The **Rev. Robert V. Roberts** is consulting his handheld computer about an appointment. He's wearing cowboy boots and a suit and tie. The suit and tie is unusual, he says. He had changed after spending the morning outside his office, cutting down a tree that had been toppled by Hurricane Charley.

It's not often you run across a guy who wields a chain saw, a PDA and a Bible with equal aplomb.

**Roberts** is a mixture of rural and city, traditional and modern, old-time religion and up-to-the-minute techniques. He's a Hardee County native ("If the Lord lets me, that's where I'm going to retire") who was the first in his fam-

ily to attend college and speaks fluent Spanish.

**Roberts**, 57, is director of missions for the South Florida Baptist Association, a group of Southern Baptist churches in Lakeland, Mulberry and Bartow. Baptist churches are independent of one another, but their associations provide a way for them to cooperate voluntarily, and **Roberts** has the task of trying to shepherd them along, training pastors here, offering resources there, mediating squabbles between pastors and congregations.

He has been at his post for 15 years, and under his guidance the association has grown from 47 all-white congregations to its current 70, which includes nine ethnic-language and five black churches. He administers a staff of three and a \$200,000 budget, which is

geared to his philosophy of serving churches and pastors.

"We work hard to help pastors and leaders do the work God is calling them to do. I felt like the attitude I wanted to bring is, 'How can I help you?'" **Roberts** says.

The pastor of the largest Baptist church in Polk County says **Roberts** carries out this part of his job well, taking care of pastors and their families.

"I know from personal experience," says the **Rev.** Jay Dennis of First Baptist Church at the Mall. "When I had surgery on my throat, the first one to call was **Robert**."

**Robert** Vincent **Roberts** was born Oct. 9, 1947 in rural Hardee County, near Wauchula. His first name was given not to match the

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**Robert V. Roberts**, director of missions for the South Florida Baptist Association, has seen great growth in his 15 years in the position.

**ROBERT VINCENT ROBERTS**

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**Birth place:** Wauchula.

**Occupation:** Southern Baptist pastor and director of missions, South Florida Baptist Association.

**Family:** Wife, Brenda K. **Roberts**; children, Benjamin S. **Roberts** and Stephen R. **Roberts**, both grown.

**Education:** Hardee High School, 1965; A.A., Polk Community College, 1971; B.A., University of South Florida, 1973; M.Div., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1976; D.Min., Luther Rice Seminary, 1982.

**Vehicle:** Ford F-250 pickup.

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## Roberts

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family name but in memory of his mother's brother, who died young. Roberts' family has stayed close by. His father still lives on the family farm, a sister lives in Wauchula and a brother is a pastor in Avon Park.

"We were poor, but I didn't know it. I always had clean clothes. We didn't have a lot of stuff, but it was enough," he says.

His great-grandfather was a Baptist pastor and his father was a deacon at New Zion Baptist Church, where the family attended each week. As a 9-year-old, Roberts made the ultimate decision for any Baptist youth and was baptized. In Baptist parlance, he was saved.

"Time really tells if a conversion is real or not," Roberts says. "I haven't always been faithful, but that's the most important relationship in my life — my walk with the Lord, followed by my wife, my children and the church. As a young pastor, I probably put the church ahead of my wife and kids."

### HEEDING THE CALL

After graduating from Hardee County High School in 1965, he married Brenda Knight, his high school sweetheart. For a while he ran his own business as a citrus grove caretaker. It was solitary work and Roberts passed the time singing hymns and praying. Gradually he became convinced he was being called into the ministry.

"Over a period of several months," he says, "I began to sense God working on my heart. My wife helped. She said, 'I believe you should be doing more with your life than driving a tractor.'"

Roberts did not succumb to the call right away. He entered Polk Community College, proceeded on to the University of South Florida and graduated in 1973 with a degree in sociology. It was during his college years that he began preaching, first at New Zion Baptist, then as a part-time pastor at Eaton Park Baptist Church in Lakeland. He made his share of mistakes, he says.

"Those people had mercy on me. I guess they figured, 'Poor boy, he just doesn't know any better,'" Roberts says with a chuckle.

Nevertheless, by his account, he worked hard and the church grew from 60 to 120 members.

Some Baptist pastors would not feel the need of a seminary degree, but Roberts' love of education led to a "deep desire" to attend seminary. Without much in the way of financial resources, he and Brenda packed up their belongings and their two small children and moved to Wake Forest, N.C., where Roberts entered Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

The controversies over the Bible that would later rend the Southern Baptist Convention were still years away, and in those days the seminaries employed methods of historical study that threw into question students' beliefs that the Bible is "inerrant," a true and accurate record of history without error. Roberts struggled with what he was being taught.

"On one paper, I got castigated because I said I believed Mary was a virgin," he says. "I had enough background that liberalism challenged my faith, but a lot of guys didn't have a strong background and they accepted what they were taught as true."

The key for Roberts was the realization that he could use the methods of his professors but did not have to reach the same conclusions. He emerged from seminary still a believer that the Bible is "the infallible word of God," a belief he holds to this day.

The wars Baptists fought over the Bible have mostly passed by Polk County, which is consistently conservative, but Roberts expresses disappointment that disagreements over biblical interpretations have sometimes come between him and pastors he has worked with.

"He has uncompromising convictions," says Jay Dennis of First Baptist. "I've seen him go the extra mile, not only to do the right thing but to communicate it in the right way."

### FACING BURNOUT

Rather than take a church position after seminary, Roberts and his wife decided to apply to the mission field. A "facility with languages" helped him learn Spanish quickly and the Southern Baptist Convention sent Roberts and his family to Panama, where he helped start new churches in the border region near Costa Rica and taught at a Baptist seminary near Panama City. He

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also served as pastor of the largest Spanish-speaking Baptist church in the country.

Roberts describes himself as "driven," and after 10 years in Panama, his breakneck pace took its toll.

"I had worked myself down to a frazzle. If I had stayed, it probably would have killed me," he says.

The family returned to Lakeland in 1986, and Roberts became pastor of Crystal Lake Baptist Church. He was determined to change his lifestyle and began taking regular days off and vacations, spending more time with his family. Even though his children are grown, he still makes a point of reserving Friday nights for a "date" with his wife.

"When the boys were with us, we ate at McDonald's a lot," he jokes.

It's a lesson he stresses to pastors — find a balance between work and leisure.

"Pastors have a tendency to two extremes — to work too hard or to hide in the ministry and be lazy. Neither is a biblical, godly position," he says.

In 1989, the director of missions for the South Florida Baptist Association retired. Roberts had done similar work in Panama, and he hoped he might be considered for the post. He was not the first choice, but association members rejected the search committee's candidate and in the resulting disarray, Roberts' name was put forward. He was elected unanimously.

Under Roberts' tenure, the association has made a conscious effort to start new churches, especially ethnic-language congregations.

The association now includes Hispanic, Haitian, Filipino and Vietnamese churches.

The Rev. Steve Henderson, pastor of Trinity Baptist Church in Lakeland, met Roberts when he became the pastor at Crystal Lake Baptist. He says Roberts has done an excellent job.

"He's a very gifted person. He has high standards, and you can always count on him. . . . He's not a proud or arrogant person at all," he said.

The ministry can be lonely, especially for pastors in small churches. Henderson said Roberts makes a special point of encouraging them, even in small ways, like sending pastors birthday cards each year.

Roberts has studied church leadership and teaches classes for pastors — in Spanish and English — at the association office. He is also an adjunct instructor at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary's Tampa campus. He says seeing pastors develop and mature as leaders is his biggest satisfaction.

"I enjoy seeing churches grow, and churches depend on leadership," he says. "If they have that, they're going to do well. Guys who have left here will call me back and say, 'Thank you for your help.'"

"That's a big blessing, because the kingdom of God is more important than the South Florida Association. It's not just taking care of our little flock."

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