



LEGACY

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 2026, the LEGACY monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of those men and women whom we call:

“Florida Baptists’ Heroes of the Faith.”

Evangelism has been a standard of Florida Baptist doctrine and practice. The challenge for evangelism – based upon the New Testament directive of the Great Commission – primarily has been the responsibility of the individual Christian and the local church. The featured Heroes of the Faith for April are the only two individuals who have been designated as “state evangelist”: Kinsey Chambers and T. O. Reese.

Kinsey Chambers

“I have travelled 1,688 miles, preached 68 sermons, delivered 11 exhortations, made 13 Sabbath School addresses, also delivered 18 addresses in presenting the claims of the Baptist Convention . . . Made 54 family visits, aided in constituting one church and baptized seven,” wrote Rev. Kinsey Chambers in his 1873 report as state evangelist to the Florida Baptist State Convention. Chambers made similar reports during the next four years while serving the state convention. Chambers is credited with baptizing over 500 persons during his ministry.

Kinsey Chambers (b. 1814; d. 1889) was a Milledgeville, Georgia, native who, at the age of 18, made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ and was baptized in the Mount Olive Baptist Church. Six years later, responding to the call of God to enter the preaching ministry, Chambers was ordained in 1839. The first church he served was the Beron Baptist Church in Camden County, Ga.

Chambers married his first wife, Minerva Ann Simpson (b. 1836; d. 1848). The couple had five children. The Chambers family moved to the Florida Territory in 1845 (the year Florida achieved statehood) and settled in Columbia County. Soon after settling in Florida the couple had their fifth child in 1848 and Minerva experienced an untimely death.

Chambers itinerant preaching circuit resulted in his organizing and serving as the first pastor of the Ephesus Baptist Church at King's Ferry (in present day Nassau County).

He returned to Milledgeville, Ga., where he met and married Martha O. Martin (b. 1829; d. 1900). Between 1857 and 1871 the couple had nine children. In addition to being a farmer to provide for his growing family, Chambers continued his bi-vocational ministry each weekend.

By 1859, Chambers helped constitute the Elim Church in Fort White, Fla., where he was subsequently called to serve as pastor from 1862 to 1865. He also served as parttime pastor of the Falling Creek Baptist Church, Lake City, from 1859 to 1872. Chambers was instrumental in the formation of the Santa Fee Missionary Baptist Association in 1857. He was enlisted to serve as the association's domestic missionary and was responsible for the starting of eight churches in a single year.

Subsequently Chambers was enlisted to serve as the statewide evangelist for the Florida Baptist State Convention, a post he held from 1873 to 1877. During those years Chambers served concurrently as pastor for six part-time churches – Bethlehem Church at Lake City; Deep Creek and Sharon Churches in Callahan; Ephesus and Hebron Churches at King's Ferry and the Mount Pleasant Church at Wellborn. A biographer wrote that Chambers was “strong in the gospel and a thorough Baptist.”

Evangelism Options Attempted

Nearly three decades passed before Florida Baptists and Southern Baptists began to recognize the need for more intentional evangelization efforts towards spiritually lost persons. **Up until this time, since the late nineteenth century, the promotion of evangelism -- a staple of Baptist doctrine and practice – had been entrusted to appointed committees on evangelism.** During the decade of the 1920s, the Florida Baptist Convention employed a one-half dozen pastors to serve as part-time “Enlistment-Evangelists.” Their task was to organize churches, conduct evangelistic crusades and revivals, as well as “assist pastors and their churches over the many obstacles that retard their growth.” Unfortunately, by December 1929, Executive Secretary C. M. Brittain reported that the evangelism effort had been discontinued.

While many Florida Baptists agreed to the need and value of a Florida staff evangelist to assist local churches, the financial crisis experienced by the Convention in the late 1920s and early 1930s kept the dream from being realized. Finally, the State Board of Missions recommended and the State Convention approved in 1933 a proposal to employ a person to give leadership to “evangelism and enlistment.”

T. O. Reese

In April 1934, C. M. Brittain reported in the *Florida Baptist Witness* that the “Lord has come to our assistance to make this work possible.” A Jacksonville layman, named W. C. Wells apparently was led by God to contribute the needed financial resources to underwrite for one year at least one-half of the salary of a state evangelist. The State Board jumped at the proposal, agreed to find the additional funding for the salary and began the search for the right man to serve as state evangelist.

Surprisingly, the State Board did not have to look any further than Southwest Florida to find its state evangelist prospect. **Serving as pastor of the First Baptist Church, Sarasota, was one of the nation's leading evangelists – T. O. Reese.** In his statewide convention assignment Reese became a source of encouragement and progenitor of evangelistic emphasis for the ensuing seven years of his service.

Prior to the Sarasota pastorate (1931 – 1934), Reese had successfully served four years (1927 – 1931) as pastor of First Baptist Church, Perry. Yet, his reputation as an evangelist was more notable and widely known. The North Carolina native was trained and educated at Mars Hill College, Washington College, and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.



Tullius O. Reese (b. 1878; d. 1947) formerly served as state evangelist for the Tennessee Baptist Convention and later served 13 years as a staff evangelist with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. Through his mass evangelism crusades Reese claimed to have led between 16,000 and 18,000 people to make a profession of faith in Christ.

During Reese's Florida convention service, on average each year he reportedly delivered over 600 sermons and recorded between 550 and 700 conversions to faith in Christ. As a result of action by messengers to the January 1941, annual State Convention meeting, the position of statewide evangelist was eliminated and a new Department of Promotion for evangelism was authorized. Reese went to serve as pastor for churches in Apalachicola and Lake Mystic Church in Bristol.

"He is a seasoned evangelist but has had sufficient experience as a pastor to know how to sympathize with the pastor and help him solve his problems," Brittain wrote in the *Witness*.

[**RESOURCES:** Florida Baptist Convention *Annuals*, 1873, 1875 and 1876, 1877; C.M. Brittain, "Kingdom Affairs in Florida," *Florida Baptist Witness*, April 26, 1934; also see Florida Baptist *Annual* 1934 – 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1940, and 1941; Florida Baptist Historical Society files.]

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