



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.”

The featured Hero of the Faith for June is William E. “Willy” Rice:

Clearwater Pastor Willy Rice Elected as 64th President of Southern Baptist Convention



Dr. William E. “Willy” Rice, senior pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Clearwater, for the past 22 years, was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention this week (June 8 – 10) in Orlando where the annual meeting was held.

Rice, 62, received 5,271 votes while Josh Powel of South Carolina – the only other candidate – received 3,821 votes. There were 9,063 total ballots and 25 were disallowed. Rice was nominated by Adrian Taylor, pastor of Spring Hill Church in Gainesville, Fla.

“I’m very humbled and honored, obviously, to be elected to this position, and I think it’s been a good two days for Southern Baptists,” Rice said in his opening statement at a post-election news conference. “I think that anyone who may be concerned about a leftward undertow, a woke riptide in the SBC, I think we leave Orlando with that firmly dispelled.”

Continuing Rice affirmed, “The Southern Baptist Convention is not eroding [or] equivocating. The Southern Baptist Convention is enduring. . . We are convictional, cheerful Baptists who are grateful for our Baptist heritage, confident in what we believe. And I think we reaffirmed that this week with a couple of decisions.”

One of those decisions was an initial two-thirds vote of affirmation for the so-called Truth and Unity Amendment, which would amend the SBC Constitution regarding the role and function of pastor – a role only to be held by men. Rice observed that the action is not a “tightening” of Southern Baptist convictions, but a “re-articulation” of them. The amendment must be again approved at next year’s annual meeting before being added to the convention’s Constitution.

“This is who Baptist people have been historically,” he said. “We articulated it in the *Baptist Faith and Message 2000*, and even that wasn’t a new statement. It was just an articulation of what we thought Baptists have always believed. It comes down to biblical authority, [and] we just think that when the Bible speaks on those offices [in the church], it speaks with authority.”

The SBC president should represent the churches, he emphasized, as a model of the way the Convention operates. Rice promised to do just that.

“The Southern Baptist Convention is best when it is led by local churches and pastors,” he said. “I think everyone says that, but over time, institutions drift toward maintenance and preservation. It’s important that pastors and churches lead.”

The new president further stated, “Baptists are a local church people. We’re not top-down. We’re not run out of Nashville, Louisville, Wake Forest, Atlanta or anywhere else. We’re independent, autonomous churches.”

According to its 2025 Annual Church Profile statistics and the church’s financial office, Calvary Church gave \$343,549 through the Cooperative Program, approximately three percent of its undesignated contributions, \$52,222 to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering giving and \$76,351 to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. Calvary reported 409 baptisms in 2024 and 3,055 people in average worship attendance.

Rice previously served as pastor of Florida Baptist churches in Pensacola and Tampa. He also served Alabama Baptist churches in Anniston and Dora. He is a graduate of Samford University (1985) in Birmingham, Ala., and earned the M.Div. (1990) and a Doctor of Ministry (1996) degrees from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

He and his wife Cheryl have three children and six grandchildren.

Rice, served as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention from 2006-2008, and previously served as president of the SBC Pastors’ Conference in 2015.

William E. “Willy” Rice is one of eight men who have served as a pastor in a Florida Baptist church and who were elected as president of the Southern Baptist Convention since it was organized in 1845.

The other seven pastors, and the years they presided over the national organization, include: Carl E. Bates (1971; 1972); Adrian Rogers (1980; 1987; 1988); Charles Stanley (1985; 1986); Jerry Vines (1989; 1990); James Henry (1995; 1996); Jack Graham (2003; 2005)' and Bobby Welch (2005; 2006). The 2026 *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage* will feature biographical profiles on each of those pastors.

[**RESOURCES:** Scott Barkley, "Rice speaks on Southern Baptists' past, present, future at press conference," *Baptist Press*, June 10, 2026; Statistical report, Calvary Baptist Church, Clearwater; *Florida Baptist Witness*; and Florida Baptist Historical Society files.]

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