

Florida Baptist Historical Society Biography Collection

This link provides the specific resource information which documents and undergirds the biographical resource information on a specific Florida Baptist pastors, church staff or significant laity leaders.

The link you have chosen connects to the specific individual's resource files that provide the basis for information which the Historical Society has used to develop the respective biographical profile. The sources attached may include copies of articles gleaned from back issues of the *Florida Baptist Witness* and other news publications. Other resources include books, historical journal articles and church histories that are cited as documentation for the biography.

Visit our website at FloridaBaptistHistory.org

Smith, James A., Sr. (1964-) served as editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness* from 2002 to 2013. He is a native of Norfolk, Virginia. He graduated from Dallas (Texas) Baptist University and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Smith worked two years as director of communications at the Republican Study Committee in the U. S. House of Representatives. He subsequently served as a news and information specialist for Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In 2001, Smith became editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness* where he served until 2013. He returned to Southern Seminary where he served as executive editor and chief spokesman, 2013 – 2016; followed by the National Religious Broadcasters, 2016 – 2019; and then to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he is the associate vice president for communications from 2019 to present (2024). He is married to Linda Seabrooke Smith.



From:
Sent: Thursday, October 28, 2021 10:04 AM
To:
Subject: New Bio -- Witness Editor James Smith
Attachments: Smith-James A-ca 2020-cropped.jpeg

Flag Status: Flagged

James A. Smith, Sr.

James A. Smith, Sr., (b. November 22, 1964), served as editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness* from 2001 to 2013. The Norfolk, Virginia, native came to the *Witness* with various experiences which had included service with two Southern Baptist seminaries as a news and information specialist. These included Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from where he came to the *Witness* post.

Smith previously served on the staff of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, where he was the director of government relations from 1989 to 1995. Before joining the Commission, Smith worked two years as director of communications at the Republican Study Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives. Smith's education included a B.S. degree from Dallas (Texas) Baptist University (1987) and a master of divinity degree from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1999. His Florida connection was derived from his spouse, Linda Seabrooke (married May 23, 1987), whose parents lived in Florida. The couple had two children. After 12 years' service as executive editor of the *Witness* – in May, 2013 – Smith resigned to accept a position at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as executive editor and chief spokesman. Subsequently, in 2016 Smith was named vice president of communications for the National Religious Broadcasters organization. More recently, in 2019, Smith accepted the position of associate vice president for communications at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

10/28/21, 9:01 AM

Re: Florida Baptist Biographical Profile

From:

To:

Subject: Re: Florida Baptist Biographical Profile

Date: Wed, Sep 29, 2021 4:11 pm

Attachments: 5A797ED7-DB39-4FF3-8FDB-81AF834A9896.jpeg (146K)

James A. Smith
Witness Editor
2001-2013

Don:

Here's the information you requested:

I was born in Norfolk, Virginia, on November 22, 1964. Married to Linda Seabrooke, May 23, 1987. Children: Lauren Alyssa (Smith) Garner, January 24, 1989; James Andrew Smith Jr, June 15, 1991.

I don't have an updated resume to provide, but my post-Florida Baptist Witness days have included: Southern Seminary, 2013-2016, executive editor and chief spokesman; National Religious Broadcasters, 2016-2019, vice president of communications; Southwestern Seminary, 2019 to present, associate vice president for communications.

Attached is a headshot, which is about a year old.

I hope this is helpful.

Blessings,

Jim

James A. Smith Sr.

Associate Vice President for Communications | Office of Communications

Executive Editor | Seminary Hill Press

From: James A. Smith Sr. <JASmith@swbts.edu>

Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2021 at 5:28 PM

To:

Subject: Re: Florida Baptist Biographical Profile

Don:

Thanks for your reply.

I'm glad to know of your continuing connection. I'd be interested to hear more about your time on staff at the seminary.

Yes, it's something of a twist for me to be at Southwestern after my many years of connection at Southern (as a student, graduate, staff member [twice], adjunctive faculty member, trustee, and parent of a graduate). However, I also have ties to Southwestern. My dad came here at mid-life in 1979 when I was a teenager and we lived on campus—a Stanley Avenue duplex converted into a single-family dwelling, which is now a parking lot that I can see from my office on the second floor of Fleming Hall. My dad, who you may recall passed away while I was still in Florida, would be very pleased to know that I'm now working at his alma mater!

I'll get the info you need to you before your deadline.

Blessings,

Jim

James A. Smith Sr.

Associate Vice President for Communications | Office of Communications

Executive Editor | Seminary Hill Press

From

Date: Tuesday, September 21, 2021 at 7:39 AM

To:

Subject: Re: Florida Baptist Biographical Profile

Jim

Thank you for your timely response. If possible I would like the biographical information and photograph, as well as the birth date, as soon as possible. Certainly I would hope you could provide the information by September 30. Just attach the material to an Email using my Email address.

Yes, I still receive *Southwestern News*, which is a far cry from the publication I helped write and edit in between 1970 – 1978. We had all of one writer (me), an occasional student writer, the alumni secretary, and a student photographer. In my years as director of communications (1972-78), I hired student writer Barbara Denman (small world isn't it).

I trust you are doing well at keeping Southwestern at the forefront of Southern Baptist life, despite your love and loyalty to Southern Seminary. Its all good, particularly if the seminaries continue to faithfully fulfill their mission as envisioned by their founders. As Florida Baptist's resident historian, my fondness for and interest in Baptist's formative leaders has grown more keen as I do more research.

Warm regards

Don Hepburn

—Original Message—

From:

To:

Sent: Mon, Sep 20, 2021 12:13 pm

Subject: Re: Florida Baptist Biographical Profile

Don:

It's great to hear from you. I trust you're doing well.

I'm happy to provide the requested information. By when do you need it?

As a Southwesterner, I hope you're receiving the seminary magazine and are otherwise connected to your alma mater in every way you desire. If you find yourself close to campus, I hope you'll come by for a visit.

Thanks,
Jim

James A. Smith Sr.

Associate Vice President for Communications | Office of Communications

Executive Editor | Seminary Hill Press

swbts.edu

From:

Date: Monday, September 20, 2021 at 9:26 AM

To:

Subject: Florida Baptist Biographical Profile

Dear Dr. Smith (Jim as the case may be)

Greetings from the Florida Baptist Historical Society where I served as the Managing Director. The Society maintains biographical files on over 6000 significant Florida Baptist pastors and church leaders. We are continually updating and adding new profiles which are maintained in hard copy files and simplified versions posted on the Society's website. [See <https://floridabaptisthistory.org/biography-collection>]

We recently began to update the files to reflect information on all the former editors of the *Florida Baptist Witness*. We are down to adding the final three editors, but find **we lack complete information on these, including you.**

Would you please provide by return Email your home town and the date of your birth? Also we could use your marriage date and spouse's maiden name and the names and dates of birth of your child. In our existing file on you, in addition to bio profiles carried in the *Witness* at the times of your election and resignation, as well as stories on your job movement, we have the basic degrees and schools attended. However, if you have and updated biographical data sheet you can send, that would be greatly appreciated.

Our file photograph of you, which we would normally post with a brief biographical statement on the website, is from your early Florida days. That is pre-beard. If you have a more current digital photo you wish to send (minimum 300 dpi), we would gladly use that.

Thank you for your attention and assistance to these requests.

Regards

Don Hepburn

Managing Director

Florida Baptist Historical Society

1 Attached Images

Feb 1, 2001

Smith named *Witness* executive editor

James A. Smith Sr., who has served as an administrator at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary since 1997, has been named executive editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, the official newsmagazine of the Florida Baptist Convention.

Smith, 37, succeeds Michael Chute, who will join the faculty of William Carey College in Hattiesburg, Miss., in early February. Chute, who announced his resignation last November effective Feb. 5, will chair the college's department of communications.

The Board of Commissioners for



SMITH

the *Florida Baptist Witness* unanimously elected Smith on Jan. 23, said Vernon Harkey, Commission chairman. The nine-member Commission is the governing board of the paper, which is an agency of the Florida Baptist State Convention. Smith will begin his duties with the *Witness* on Feb. 5, added Harkey, pastor of First Baptist Church, Avon Park.

"Jim Smith is a gifted writer with a vision and calling to see the *Florida Baptist Witness* into the 21st century," Harkey said. "Please pray for Jim and his family as they make their move to Florida."

Smith has served as director of public relations at the Louisville, Ky., school since 1998 and was previously director of news and information. Before joining the Southern Seminary public relations staff he served from 1995-1997 as director of news and

information at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo.

"Jim Smith is a superbly talented journalist, a man of deep convictions, and a devoted Southern Baptist," said R. Albert Mohler Jr., president of Southern Seminary. "He will bring outstanding leadership as editor of the *Florida Baptist Witness*. Jim is a consummate Christian communicator with deep convictions and a wonderful ability to communicate with all persons."

"I commend the leadership of the *Florida Baptist Witness* upon their selection and I am certain that Florida Baptists and Southern Baptists beyond will appreciate Jim Smith the way we have appreciated him at Southern Seminary."

A native of Norfolk, Va., Smith has wide experience in Southern Baptist

denominational life. In addition to his work at Southern and Midwestern, he was the first Washington, D.C., staff member of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, serving as director of government relations from 1989-95. He also served as a member of the Resolutions Committee at the 1998 Southern Baptist Convention in Salt Lake City.

Before joining the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission (the Christian Life Commission at the time), Smith worked two years as director of communications at the Republican Study Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Smith earned the master of divinity degree from Southern Seminary in 1999 and the bachelor of science

See SMITH, Page 5

FLORIDA BAPTIST

NEWSMAGAZINE OF THE FLORIDA BAPTIST STATE CONVENTION

FEBRUARY 1, 2001

Board sends additional \$1.5 million to SBC

■ Elects evangelism head, aids struggling church

\$1,561,175 in "new money" provided by Florida Baptists to the SBC during

Baptist Children's Homes.
The \$1 445 381 in unrestricted

James
Smith, Sr.
2001-2013
Feb May

...plays a TV jour-
Behind", and his wife,
...a fellow entertainment
...also stars in the movie.
evening also featured several
ng artists from the movie's
rack: Bob Carlisle of "Butterfly
Grammy fame, Brian Duncan,
nk and Joy Williams. First Bap-
urch, Franklin, also known as
eople's Church," hosted the
edia event.

...is in January were slated in Bir-
am, Ala., at the Cathedral of the
at Atlanta's First Baptist Church;
mantown Baptist Church in
Memphis, Tenn.; Springdale,
t First Baptist Church; at Hous-
second Baptist Church; in Austin,
at Shoreline Christian Center;
San Antonio, Texas, at First
t Church of Castle Hills.
...movie, which as a video, has
ly sold more than 1 million
...is based on the "Left Behind"
series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry
ns. "The Mark," the eighth in the
...currently is on the nation's best-

...the message in a unique...
ting featuring highlights from the
film, the musicians and the stars."
People who have read the New Tes-
tament Book of Revelation have "won-
dered what it all means," Cameron said.
"So I hope the movie will make
people take a look at how authentic
their own faith is and consider the
truths of the Bible," he continued.
Endorser of the film, recording

artist Rebecca St. James said, "I really
think that people will be challenged to
think about whether or not they are
ready for Jesus to come back." Chris-
tian financial expert Larry Burkett,
meanwhile, called "Left Behind," which
was produced in Toronto by Cloud

Ten Pictures, "a most compelling film,
worthy of your entertainment dollar."
"This film is sensitively written,
beautifully directed, acted and pro-
duced," Pat Boone said, "I feel it's cer-
tainly one of the very best Christian-
produced films ever made." (BP)

Smith eager to serve with Baptists

From Page 1

degree from Dallas (Texas) Baptist
University in 1987.

Smith and his wife, Linda, were
married in 1987. They are parents to
a 12-year-old daughter, Lauren, and a
9-year-old son, James Andrew, Jr. The
Smiths are members of North Oldham
Baptist Church in Goshen, Ky.

"I am gratified by the confidence
of the *Florida Baptist Witness* Com-

mission and honored by this opportu-
nity to serve Florida Baptists," Smith
said. "I look forward to getting to
know and serve alongside Florida
Baptists.

"I leave Southern Seminary with
mixed emotions. I love this seminary.
It is a great honor to be counted
among the 20,000 alumni of this stor-
ied institution. It was a unique privi-
lege and awesome responsibility to
serve with Dr. Mohler and this world-
class faculty. Our time in Louisville
has been wonderful.

"Nevertheless, a new challenge has
been set before me that I believe is
ordained by God," Smith continued.
"Under my leadership, the *Witness*
will endeavor to defend the faith, re-
port faithfully news about the Florida
Baptist Convention and the Southern
Baptist Convention, publish feature
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ship of Michael Chute. He deserves
much credit for his labor on behalf of
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Under Smith's leadership at South-
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relations has been recognized several
times with awards from the Public
Relations Society of America's Blue-
grass Chapter and the International
Association of Business Communicators
of Kentucky. Smith received an award
for news story writing in 1997.

Advancements at Southern under
his leadership include an expanded
and redesigned Internet web site, es-
tablishment of Southern Seminary
News Service, a redesigned and ex-
panded weekly campus newsletter
and significant expansion of the semi-
nary's advertising and news programs.

Smith's parents live in Hedgesville,
W.Va., where his father, Floyd E. Smith,
is a Southern Baptist pastor. His wife's
parents are residents of Leesburg,
Fla., and Bradenton, Fla. (FBW)

Baptist groups minister to quake victims with food, water, clothes

From Page 1

Christian Aid Mission, based in Char-
ottesville, Va.
indigenous groups are already
ing as much as they can," said
e Thollander, Christian Aid direc-
or India and Pakistan, "but they
ot go to their neighbors with aid
don't have."

hollander noted: "Help sent now
help native missionaries open
ts to the Lord Jesus."

teve Nelson, director of hunger
cerns with the Southern Baptist
cs & Religious Liberty Commission,
"Southern Baptists are moving
kly to meet needs in Jesus' name
they attempt to ease the suffering
hese dear people." Relief donations
y be sent to the International
sion Board General Relief Fund.
BWA's Asian regional secretary, Bon-
Resu, likened the devastation to a
zone—"reminiscent of Second
rld War pictures of bombed-out
es in Europe and Asia, and also to
yclone-devastated areas of Orissa
October 1999," he reported.

"The greatest need now is for med-
l personnel and medicines" for the
ousands who were injured, Resu
d the BWA. Hundreds of thousands
ve been left homeless.

The Indian Church's Auxiliary for
cial Action (CASA) is already re-

damage is far worse than anything he
has seen before.

In launching an Indian earthquake
appeal, BWAid director Paul Montacute
said, "Baptists again have the oppor-
tunity of being involved in Carey's
India and of standing alongside our
Indian sisters and brothers as they
seek to bring relief to those who are
suffering."

Among other groups mobilizing aid
for Indian earthquake relief are World
Vision, based in Tacoma, Wash.;
Christian Aid Mission, based in
Charlottesville, Va.; MAP
International, based in Brunswick,
Ga.; Food for the Hungry, based in
Scottsdale, Ariz.; and Salvation Army
World Service Office, based in
Alexandria, Va.



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MEMORIAL DAY IS MAY 27

Remembering
oft-forgotten
casualties
of war PAGE 20



Top CP givers in
Florida PAGES 10-11

FLORIDA BAPTIST WITNESS FBW

Volume 130, Issue 10

Inspiration and information for such a time as this

May 23, 2013

Witness Executive Editor James Smith takes position at Southern Seminary

JACKSONVILLE (FBW)—James A. Smith, executive editor of *Florida Baptist Witness*, told board members May 9

By **JONI B. HANNIGAN**
Managing Editor
jhannigan@goFBW.com

He will leave by July 31 to become the seminary executive editor and chief spokesman at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville.

"Please know of my affection for you and for Florida Baptists," Smith told the board, gathered in Ocala for its bi-annual meeting. "I have been blessed abundantly by serving as executive editor of *Florida Baptist Witness*. "My time here has greatly shaped me, making me the minister I am today. Members of the *Witness* board have been unfailingly supportive. I'm particularly thankful for the godly

counsel and direction I have received from each board chairman."

Smith said he was grateful for the support from Florida Baptist leaders, including John Sullivan, executive director of the Florida Baptist Convention, and noted "producing the *Witness* is heavily dependent on a capable staff, which I have been blessed with over the years. I'm appreciative of the hard and dedicated work of

the *Witness* staff, especially Joni and John Hannigan."

Smith, 48, has served the *Witness* since 2001. He previously served at Southern from 1997-2001 as news director and later as director of public relations, and before that time as news and information director at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1995-1997; as director of government relations at the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, 1989-1995; and as the director of communications for

the Republican Study Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, 1987-1989.



SMITH

In the new position, Smith will oversee the editorial content of the seminary's publications, supervise the seminary's news operation, and lead public and media relations. He is expected to start no later than Aug. 1.

In Smith's 12 years at the *Witness*, the official newspaper of the Florida Baptist State Convention, he has emphasized

See **SMITH**, Page 14



Family mission trip a 'last chance' gift for graduating college student

Buttress in Guatemala

drums in church. Williams, strategist of the Adult and Worship Ministries Team at the Florida Baptist Convention, said he first heard "Celebrate Life" as a young teenager at Seminole Heights Baptist Church in Tampa.

"That experience established a standard for music and worship that has followed me for four decades. Who can forget the rhythmic energy of 'HE is alive, He is ALIVE, He IS Alive' or the haunting melody and

been a great reward."

Mike Harland, worship director at LifeWay Christian Resources, which still sells "Celebrate Life," wrote that the first accompaniment track he heard was Red's "The Old Songs." It gave churches in the 1970s the opportunity to sing modern, rhythmic versions of old hymns.

Red was also founding musical director and conductor of The CenturyMen, a men's choir of Baptist ministers of music. Beginning in 1969, the group

was always appreciated by Florida Baptists. He will be missed," McCullough said.

Red wrote more than 2,500 published works and produced more than 4,000 recordings. He composed and arranged music for hundreds of shows, documentaries and specials for network and cable television. He wrote and edited 50 music textbooks.

Turner experienced Red's work ethic during Praise '75, when the 1975 Baptist Hymnal was introduced. Red was in Nashville at the same

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"Pray for Ben" web page had nearly 40,000 views, and its Facebook pages had 20,000 since the accident. About 30 percent of the views were from people who live locally, and the remaining 70 percent from other cities in America and other countries including Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, India, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, and Chile.

Ben Bowersox was playing near a retractable hangar door at the airport, according to a press release, when he grabbed a cable. Following the accident, he was transported to St. Vincent's Medical Center Southside, and then immediately flown to Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina for surgery to repair his arms, hands, and re-attach the fingers.

The day after the accident, Ben came out of a 15-hour surgery and was in pediatric intensive care. By the next day he was put into a Hyperbaric Chamber for therapy.

The church's senior pastor, Mac Brunson, has posted periodic updates on his twitter account @macbrunson, and the church has alerted followers to updates on its website via its twitter and Facebook accounts.

A more complete timeline of events, as well as comments and prayers, are posted online at www.fbcjax.com. An email, prayforben@fbcjax.com is also in place for the family to receive prayers and words of encouragement.

The former worship pastor, James Whitmire, led the church in prayer May 19 for the entire family, as Ben was in surgery to reassess his condition. It was reported later his four fingers were removed back to the first knuckle. "God is good and it is well with my soul," his father wrote.

SMITH: Board chairman expresses thanks

From Page 1

coverage on missions, theology and moral concerns. The *Witness* website (gofbw.com), established in 2002, is now vastly expanded with readers across the Southern Baptist Convention and is watched closely by reporters of Florida newspapers. His editorials took a strong, conservative position on issues within the denomination and in the broader culture.

Under Smith's leadership, the print edition of the newspaper has gone through three redesigns, added color, and moved from a weekly to a bi-weekly print edition. It is available on mobile devices and in a digital online format.

In 2011-2012, Smith served as president of the Association of State Baptist Publications, the fellowship of state Baptist newspaper editors.

"The task of Christian journalism is vital for the denomination and the Kingdom," Smith told the board in his resignation, quoting from its mission statement: "*Florida Baptist Witness* publishes Good News about God's work that encourages, enables and exhorts Florida Baptists to exalt God and extend His Kingdom."

"I will be praying for you as you seek to fulfill this mission and chart the future of *Florida Baptist Witness* as you continue to 'compile an account

of the things accomplished among us' (Luke 1:1)," Smith continued.

Ken Whitten, chairman of the *Witness* board of directors, said in a May 13 letter, it is with "a mixture of joy and sadness" that the board accepts Smith's resignation.

"Our joy is for Jim in that he has been called to ... Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is not only a graduate of Southern, but his love runs deep for Dr. Al Mohler and the entire staff, and like Florida Baptists, he will serve them well," wrote Whitten, pastor of Idlewild Baptist Church in Lutz.

"Our sadness is that for 12 years Jim Smith and Florida Baptists have been talking to one another through articles, editorials, and reports; and we will miss his conservative mind, theological heart, his political views, and gifted pen."

Whitten said Smith, "loves to report news not only from Florida, but also from Washington, D.C., Tennessee, Georgia and Virginia," and spoke highly of the editor's tenure in Florida. "We have been tremendously blessed to have had Jim at the helm these past 12 years."

Speaking on behalf of the board and Florida Baptists, Whitten told Smith he will be greatly missed.

"We pray God's best for you and Linda as you begin a new chapter in

Louisville. They will love you as we have," Whitten continued. "Thank you for your devotion to the Lord, the accuracy of your writing, and your heart that always came through in your editorials."

Sullivan, who attended the board meeting in Ocala, said Smith "has served Florida Baptists well for the past 12 years."

"He is regarded highly in the political and spiritual community as a gifted and challenging editor," Sullivan said in May 13 statement. "His editorials have been candid and always conservative. The *Witness* is highly appreciated as a religious publication."

"I wish Jim the very best in his new assignment. He is going for all the right reasons—mainly the will of the Lord," Sullivan continued. "He will be well received at Southern Seminary. May the good things of grace continue in his life and ministry."

R. Albert Mohler Jr., SBTS president, in a news release, called Smith "one of the most respected journalists and writers in the Southern Baptist Convention."

"I have known Jim Smith for many years, and I have seen the evidence of his work and leadership up close," Mohler said. "I am tremendously proud to have him return to Southern Seminary in this important new capacity."

In a letter to Florida Baptists,

Whitten announced an "Editorial Search Team" comprised of the Executive Committee of the *Witness* board of directors, with two additional members at large. He said the team will meet in June to discuss duties, responsibilities, and key roles the board desires the editor to possess, and will at that time choose a chairman and vice chairman.

Members of the team are Whitten; Randy Knepper, a laymen and member of Hibernia Baptist Church, Fleming Island; Brad Smith, student pastor at First Baptist Church, New Port Richey; Sidney Lanier, laymen, The Village Baptist Church, West Palm Beach; Jim Locke, senior pastor, Hillcrest Baptist Church, Pensacola; and two at-large members, Randy Huckabee, First Baptist Church, Okeechobee; and Patrick Pfrimmer, Woodlawn Baptist Church, Crestview.

Whitten pledged to keep Florida Baptists informed and asked for prayers for the team. Resumes can be sent to: Ken Whitten, Chairman; Board of Trustees, *Florida Baptist Witness*; 18333 Exciting Idlewild Blvd; Lutz, FL 33548.

"We know God always pays for what He orders," Whitten said. "As our editor, Jim Smith, begins a new chapter, God has His person ready to begin one with us. As a board, I want you to know we stay committed to the best, newsworthy, conservative, informative and uplifting newspaper in Florida."

Feb, ~~1997~~ - July, 2013
2001

Smith named executive editor of Florida Baptist Witness

By Staff

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--James A. Smith Sr., who has served as an administrator at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary since 1997, has been named executive editor of the Florida Baptist Witness, the official newsmagazine of the Florida Baptist Convention.

Smith, 37, succeeds Michael Chute, who will join the faculty of William Carey College in Hattiesburg, Miss., in early February. Chute, who announced his resignation last November effective Feb. 5, will chair the college's department of communications.

The Florida Baptist Witness' board of commissioners unanimously elected Smith on Jan. 23, said Vernon Harkey, commission chairman. The nine-member commission is the governing board of the paper, which is an agency of the Florida Baptist State Convention. Smith will begin his duties with the Witness on Feb. 5, Harkey said.

"Jim Smith is a gifted writer with a vision and calling to see the Florida Baptist Witness into the 21st century," Harkey said. "Please pray for Jim and his family as they make their move to Florida."

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A native of Norfolk, Va., Smith has wide experience in Southern Baptist denominational life. In addition to his work at Southern and Midwestern, he was the first Washington, D.C., staff member of the SBC's Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, serving as director of government relations from 1989-95. He served also as a member of the Resolutions Committee at the 1998 Southern Baptist Convention in Salt Lake City.

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Smith earned the master of divinity degree from Southern Seminary in 1999 and the bachelor of science degree from Dallas Baptist University in 1987.

Smith and his wife, Linda, were married in 1987. They are parents to a 12-year-old daughter, Lauren, and a 9-year-old son, James Andrew Jr. The Smiths are members of North Oldham Baptist Church in Goshen, Ky.

"I am gratified by the confidence of the Florida Baptist Witness Commission and honored by this opportunity to serve Florida Baptists," Smith said. "I look forward to getting to know and serve alongside Florida Baptists."

"I leave Southern Seminary with mixed emotions. I love this seminary. It is a great honor to be counted among the 20,000 alumni of this storied institution. It was a unique privilege and awesome responsibility to serve with Dr. Mohler and this world-class faculty. Our time in Louisville has been wonderful."

"Nevertheless, a new challenge has been set before me that I believe is ordained by God," Smith continued. "Under my leadership, the Witness will endeavor to defend the faith, report faithfully news about the Florida Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention, publish feature articles of high quality and stimulate reflection and cooperative action among Florida Baptists."

"I'm grateful for the fine leadership of Michael Chute. He deserves much credit for his labor on behalf of the Witness. He has set a standard of work which will be difficult to equal."

Under Smith's leadership at Southern Seminary, the office of public relations has been recognized several times with awards from the Public Relations Society of America's Bluegrass Chapter and the International Association of Business Communicators of Kentucky. Smith received an award for news story writing in 1997.

Advancements at Southern under his leadership include an expanded and redesigned Internet website, establishment of Southern Seminary News Service, a redesigned and expanded weekly campus newsletter and significant expansion of the seminary's advertising and news programs.

Smith's parents live in Hedgesville, W.Va., where his father, Floyd E. Smith, is a Southern Baptist pastor. His wife's parents are residents of Leesburg, Fla., and Bradenton, Fla.



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, churches and events in Florida Baptist history. During the next several months this newsletter will feature the story of the development and ministry of the state Baptist news journal, *The Florida Baptist Witness*. The *Witness* was officially adopted and served as an entity of the Florida Baptist State Convention from 1884 until 2017 when it was dissolved as a State Convention agency. During its 133-year history the *Witness* had 33 editors (plus a number of associate editors) and its ownership moved on several occasions between private owners to control by the Convention corporation.



James A. Smith, Sr., 2001 – 2013

The 21st century ushered in an era that reflected a growing cultural assault upon Christian values across America. The *Florida Baptist Witness*, under the editorship of James A. Smith, Sr., (b. 1964), attempted to push back against the “darkness” by being a champion for Biblical values. In his first editorial, Smith, who began his service February 5, 2001, laid out his promised goals as the newly designated executive editor of Florida Baptists’ newspaper. He committed to: (1) “knowing who we serve;” (2) “Being an effective tool for churches;” (3) “addressing critical theological issues;” and (4) “Covering ethical issues.” These were promises he upheld during his ensuing 12-years tenure, as he said he would by citing Jude 3, “contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.” That commitment translated into an on-going reporting of important social, moral and public policy/political issues with a Biblical interpretation. Such an emphasis was not confined to the editorial page as had been the practice of prior editors, but rather filled the news and feature pages.

The Norfolk, Virginia, native came to the *Witness* with a heightened awareness of the cultural war evolving in American life. That concern was sharpened during his service with the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, where he served as the director of government relations from 1989 to 1995. Before joining the Commission, Smith worked



two years as director of communications at the Republican Study Committee in the U.S. House of Representatives. His journalism skills were additionally honed, having served two Southern Baptist seminaries as a news and information specialist. These included Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from where he came to the *Witness* post.

Smith's education included a B.S. degree from Dallas (Texas) Baptist University (1987) and a master of divinity degree from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1999. His Florida connection was derived from his spouse, Linda Seabrooke (married May 23, 1987), whose parents lived in Florida.

Revised Mission Statement

Within a year of his election as executive editor, Smith led the *Witness*' Board of Commissioners to approve a new mission statement to publicly refine the role of the newspaper. That statement stated that the, "*Florida Baptist Witness* publishes Good News about God's work that edifies, educates, exhorts and empowers Florida Baptists to glorify God and extend His kingdom." In an editorial, Smith told his readers, "I believe this mission statement is an eloquent description of the work of your state Baptist newspaper." He went on to write, "The statement makes clear why we exist, as well as what we aspire to be and do as the official news-journal" of Florida Baptists. To underscore the new direction the *Witness* was taking and to garner increased subscriptions, Smith enlisted several influential pastors who wrote articles supporting the work and ministry of the *Witness*.

National Events Affected Florida Baptists

The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, came to dominate not only the reporting of secular media, but the *Florida Baptist Witness* issued an extra edition during that memorable week. It was the first extra edition ever published by the state Baptist newspaper. According to Smith, the events of September 11, were "greatly influencing the *Witness*' news coverage," which provided to its readers, "theological and spiritual insights on the attacks," which included reactions by Florida Baptists.

Subsequently, in September, 2001, two weekly columns were added that offered topical commentary on social, cultural and morality issues. One called "Break Point," written by Charles Colson, a convicted Watergate felon, who now served as the president of Prison Fellowship Ministries. The other column titled "Family" was written by nationally known James Dobson, founder of the Focus on the Family organization. Both columns continued for to be published for several years.

The year 2003 brought coverage of the war in Iraq which served as a springboard for stories about military personnel, the ministry of Christian chaplains, Iraqi refugees in Jordan and "reflections about this major issue in American life," Editor Smith noted. The same year the editor instituted what became annual reports on legislation having a morality or family life implication that was being considered or subsequently approved by the Florida Legislature. The issue of the sanctity of life was often reported through various anti-abortion related stories.

The most significant aspect of the sanctity of life topic was addressed for nearly a year in a series of stories about Terri Schiavo, 39-year-old brain damaged Clearwater women at the center of a national debate on her quality of life and her so-called "right-to-die." Other social and public policy issues of interest to Florida Baptists, particularly the Florida Marriage Amendment to prevent same sex marriages, were regularly featured in the pages of the *Witness*. During election years, Smith not only reported on "exclusive" interviews with political candidates, but provided analysis of the candidates' position on social and moral issues.

Reporting on the Denomination

Denominational news did not take a "back seat" in receiving prime news coverage in the pages of the *Witness*. Smith regularly led with stories he initiated and wrote that addressed controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention. These included, among other topics, the Southern Baptist International Mission Board's policy on "private prayer language/tongues;" the controversy over the

“sole membership” question debated between SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman and New Orleans Seminary President Charles Kelley; the alleged culturally insensitivity of “Rickshaw Rally” VBS materials; interviews leading up to and following the approval of the Great Resurgence Commission report and its implementation in Florida; and the failed attempt to change the name of Southern Baptists to “Great Commission Baptists.”

Expanded News Delivery by Technology

Initially the two-year effort to increase subscriptions to the *Witness* resulted in a 6,000 increase by the end of 2003. Editor Smith created and launched a *Witness* website which complemented a new design of the print edition. The editor said the changes were a partial fulfillment of the *Witness*’ mission statement to more effectively reach and educate Florida Baptists. The website drew a significant increase in readers, but not necessarily paid subscriptions. By 2010 the *Witness* had established a presence on the social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook to further reach the Baptist and secular audiences. And in 2013 the *Witness* began Spanish language pages within the print and website editions of the state Baptist news-journal enhanced by the use of a Spanish language news writer. Yet such efforts never garnered significant growth in subscriptions or other revenue sources. In 2012, the *Witness* reported total paid subscriptions at 16,387 down from 43,000 reported in year 2000.

Joni Hannigan Brought Expanded News Coverage



Earlier, to strengthen its news reporting abilities, the *Witness* Commission in August, 2002, approved the hiring of Joni Hannigan as the managing editor. The California native was a trained journalist, free-lance writer and a high school English and journalism teacher. During her 12-years tenure (resigned March 31, 2014), Hannigan wrote many in-depth stories on a variety of news topics including: the Teri Schiavo life support saga; the extensive 2004-2005 hurricane season; missions’ endeavors in the Middle East and Haiti as well as the Super Bowls in Florida; and numerous feature profiles stories on “godly men” and “godly women.” Both Hannigan and Editor Smith made a continuing priority to prepare and publish stories on the work and ministries of local Florida Baptist churches and their leadership. “If the *Witness* is not focused on assisting Florida Baptists in the local church, then there is no reason for its existence,” Smith once told his readers.

An Era Ends

In May, 2013, James Smith resigned as executive editor to accept a position at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as executive editor and chief spokesman for Seminary President Albert Mohler, Jr. Subsequently, in 2016 Smith was named vice president of communications for the National Religious Broadcasters organization. More recently, in 2019, Smith accepted the position of associate vice president for communications at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he currently serves.

– Series continues next month –