



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 Heroes of the Faith for August are an African American pastor and an Anglo pastor, separated by six decades in ministry service, who worked to benefit African American congregations in Florida. These men were Rev. Cataline B. Simmons and Dr. Julius H. Avery.

Pastor Cataline Simmons

Following the Civil War, the re-organized Bethel Baptist Church of Jacksonville, in 1868 called Rev. Cataline Simmons (b. 1802; d. 1883) as their first African American pastor. Although the church had been functioning since 1838, recent events resulted in the church becoming one of the few totally African American and one of the largest congregations in Florida.

The Bethel Church was the first Baptist church established in the Jacksonville community. It also was the first known example of a church that was racially integrated during its first 30 years. The church had been organized by itinerant missionaries James McDonald (b.1798; d. 1869) and Ryan Frier (b. 1800; d. 1890).



After the Civil War, the African American members – who comprised a majority of 250 members – decided to take administrative control of the church and its property. The 40-plus Anglo-American members refused to yield control. In 1868 the African American members filed a lawsuit to take legal control of the church property. **A court agreed that the larger number of African American members gave them the greater rights to assume full control of the church property.** In the settlement agreement, the Anglo members agreed to pay the African Americans the value of the property and church building.

Soon thereafter in 1877 the Anglo members renamed their congregation as the Tabernacle Baptist Church. In 1892 the church was renamed as the First Baptist Church, Jacksonville.

Meanwhile, the African American members, who retained the church's name Bethel Baptist Church, used the \$800 in sale proceeds to purchase a property site several blocks from the original church and built a chapel. **The Bethel Church called as its first pastor Rev. Cataline Simmons, who served for the next 12 years. His effectiveness as a preacher of the gospel contributed significantly to the membership growth.** Subsequently, under Rev. Simmons' leadership, the members began to raise the funds to construct a brick structure that stands to the present day. Soon the church renamed itself as the Bethel Institutional Missionary Baptist Church.

Rev. C. B. Simmons was born in Beaufort, South Carolina, and was brought to Florida while enslaved. It is believed Simmons was able to purchase his freedom before the Emancipation Proclamation was issued in 1863. **Rev. Simmons likely acquired his pastoral training and preaching experience under the tutelage of an older Black preacher, as was the custom in the Black church.** Most Baptist preachers of that era, found the church they served could not pay even a small salary, if at all, to support their family. As a result, pastors – whether Black or Anglo – had to secure an income from other sources. With the onset of the Reconstruction era opportunities were presented for Black men to gain civic and political rights. And religious leaders, such as Rev. Simmons, found they could use political positions to benefit their African American community, as well as earn income. In due course Simmons was elected and served as a: Duval County Commissioner (1868 – 1870); Jacksonville City Councilman (1870–1872); and as Tax Assessor.

In 1869, 28 Black missionary Baptist churches came together to organize the state's first African American missionary group, the Bethlehem Baptist Association. When the association convened in its second annual meeting in 1870, Rev. Cataline Simmons was elected moderator. Such a designation was considered an honor, and the moderator was frequently called upon by the pastors in the association for counsel.

Simmons' life exemplified the dual roles many African American leaders in the post–Civil War South played: as spiritual guides and as political pioneers in building Black institutions and representation.

Rev. Julius H. Avery



“Baptists of Florida have not been alert to help the Negro Baptists of Florida to build and develop an adequate church program for their people.” This was the message and concern to his fellow Baptists expressed by Julius H. Avery (b. 1908; d. 1994), president of the 1958 Florida Baptist State Convention. He went on to stress, “As Baptists, we must not allow ourselves to be pushed into a shameful negativism on the race question. We must rise up and give the positive Christian answer.” Avery was serving as pastor, First Baptist Church, Panama City, (1949-1965).

The topic and commitment to helping his fellow Black Baptists was a matter of Christian conscience and responsibility that harkened back to Avery’s earlier pastorates serving churches in Mississippi and Alabama. It was there he saw firsthand the racial division between Blacks and Anglos. And he witnessed the need for pastor training among both the Black and Anglo pastors. Of course, he was no stranger to the issue of racism, inasmuch as his seminary doctoral dissertation, based upon his major in Christian social ethics, addressed how God’s plan of redemption was equally applied to all persons. Years later Dr. Avery published an article on “Thinking in Depth on the Race Question in America.”

As the racial divide in America continued to grow in the 1960s, the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board (now the North American Mission Board) began considering the ways and means to encourage Southern Baptists to participate in a proactive Christian response. One of the Board’s proposals was to establish a program of Cooperative Ministries with National Baptists led by Emmanuel McCall (b. 1936), their first African American employee.

The Florida Baptist Convention agreed to partner with the Home Mission Board and in 1965 employed Julius Avery to serve as the Florida Convention’s first Director of Cooperative Ministries with National Baptists. Although the creation of the office was in part a response to the growing racial tensions across the country, it was more than an assignment for Avery. This program brought structure to Avery’s 1958 call to action made in his speech at the state convention annual meeting.

Avery focused on developing strategies and program resources, working with and through the National Baptists’ three unique Florida-based conventions. **The goal was to train church leaders to more effectively reach with the gospel message African Americans. The second goal was to provide training resources to pastors and church leaders to enhance their ministry.**

In 1966 and the following years, Avery coordinated the development of an interracial conference held at the Lake Yale Baptist Assembly for ministers and laymen representing the three Baptist conventions. “The effect of this experience is increased communication between Black and White Baptist leaders,” reported Florida Baptist

Historian Earl Joiner. Additionally, Avery developed the concept of associational joint committees in Florida which resulted in improved leadership training opportunities for African America church leaders. **“Dr. Avery was known as a friend of National Baptists,”** observed Sid Smith in his history of African American Florida Baptists.

[**RESOURCES:** **Cataline Simmons:** Richard McKinney, *History of the Black Baptists in Florida*; Canter Brown, *Florida's Black Public Officials, 1867 – 1924*; and Florida Baptist Historical Society files. **Julius H. Avery:** *Florida Baptist Annuals, 1958; 1965; Florida Baptist Witness, Nov. 1958; The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage, 2000*; and Florida Baptist Historical Society files.]

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