



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 Missionary Call Sought Cuba for Christ

The featured Heroes of the Faith for September are three people whose love of Jesus Christ led them to become involved in a Florida Baptist State Convention-sponsored missionary effort called “Cuba for Christ.”



In the late nineteenth century, three people whose love of Jesus Christ led them to become involved in a Baptist missionary effort called “Cuba for Christ.” Those heroes of the faith were a 15-year-old Cuban girl named **Adela Fales**, her brother **Enrequito Fales**, and a retired Army colonel named **William F. Wood**, who was serving as pastor of the Baptist church in Key West, Florida.

“Cuba for Christ” became an evangelical rallying cry for Florida Baptists and Southern Baptists in the last half of the nineteenth century. Baptists became intrigued and

challenged over the possibilities of taking the gospel into the island nation located ninety miles off the coast of Florida. **Up until that time, all spiritual matters in Cuba were under Roman Catholic domination. So strong was the influence that Bible distribution and Christian missionary efforts by other groups were met with strong official Catholic resistance.**

At that time in the late 1800s, the nation of Cuba was under Spanish rule, and the Cuban people were struggling against the political rule. Many people who had the means and access to safety would flee to such ports as Key West, Tampa, Miami and other Gulf Coast cities when the uprisings occurred.

Adela Fales

From 1868-1878 there was another national disturbance in Cuba that again caused many people to leave the island nation and relocate to the safety of cities in the United States. One such family was the Fales' who travelled to Biloxi, Mississippi, in 1874. Once there, Maria Aneta Fales and her sister Adela Fales (b. 1869), began to attend Baptist church services and Sunday school with their mother. In 1876 the Fales' mother and daughter Maria Aneta joined the Baptist church and were baptized at Biloxi. Adela was only seven years of age when her family joined the church, and it was in that same year that the Fales family returned to Cuba. Adela had not made a public profession of faith, but she had been greatly influenced by the Bible teaching in her Sunday school and especially a small publication called *Kind Words*. That monthly publication contained Bible stories and stories about missionaries. And *Kind Words* struck such a positive chord with Adela that she took her saved copies back to Cuba with her in 1876.

In Cuba, Adela shared *Kind Words* with her friends and often begged her mother to return to the United States in order that she might go again to her Sunday school and get more copies of *Kind Words*.

In 1883, the family did return to the United States and settled in Key West. Adela began attending Sunday school in the only Baptist church in Key West. Adela and her family met William F. Wood who was the pastor of the Key West Baptist Church. On Sunday afternoons Adela – at age 14 – would attend the Baptist Sunday school. It was on one of those monthly occasions that pastor Wood distributed copies of *Kind Words* to the children attending Sunday school classes.

William F. Wood

Rev. William F. Wood, a retired Army colonel chaplain, had been serving the Key West Baptist Church since 1879. The church focused its Christian outreach to the reportedly 5,000 Cubans, who during the several Cuban civil uprisings, had temporarily relocated from Cuba to Key West. Then in 1884 Rev. Wood traveled to Jamaica and Cuba to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. While in Cuba, he was walking through a graveyard in which he read words on a Methodist minister's tombstone that declared, "**Don't Give Up on Cuba.**" **The statement came to haunt Rev. Wood**, as his heart became burdened by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, over the salvation of the Cuban people.

Returning to Key West, Rev. Wood began to learn more about the Fales' family's spiritual journey from Cuba to Mississippi to Cuba and now in Key West. Rev. Wood learned about Adela's love for the Bible, and the precious spiritual paper *Kind Words*, which had meant so much to her young life. He found in young Adela a refined, committed Christian who loved the Lord Jesus and was just as eager as he was to share the good news of Jesus.

Enrequito Fales

Soon, Pastor Wood baptized Adela and her brother Enrequito in Key West. The Fales' father was very unhappy about the religious direction of his son and after his baptism the father sent Enrequito to Havana "that he might be removed from Baptist influence." The father believed that the spiritual work done in Key West could be overcome by the attractions of Havana if he could just get his son away. The very reverse happened.

When the son **Enrequito Fales** got to Cuba he started sharing his Christian faith with others. The *Florida Baptist Witness* reported that Enrequito Fales to be "devoting a portion of his time to missionary work in Havana, while the remainder he spends in working with his own hands for a livelihood." Not only did the father fail at his attempt to remove the son from spiritual influences, but he also ended up paying for Enrequito's transportation to Cuba giving the nation **one of its earliest native Christian missionaries**.

Florida Baptists Commit to Take "Cuba for Christ"

When the Florida Baptist State Convention met in 1884, Pastor Wood told the gathering about the missionary needs in Key West and in Cuba. He presented a resolution calling for action by the State Convention to send the Gospel to Cuba. Delegates (now called messengers) at the Convention's annual meeting voted to commit the Convention as the first Missionary Baptist entity to make a concerted effort to take the Gospel message of Jesus Christ to the people of Cuban. The missionary effort became known as "Cuba for Christ." Rev. Wood also told about young Adela Fales who had Spanish language skills, connections with Cuba, and a commitment to share God's word and the story of Jesus Christ.

The Florida Convention also instructed Wood to employ Miss Fales as a teacher and interpreter in his work among the Cubans living in Key West. And they also committed to fund the missionary efforts of Rev. Wood and Adela Fales in their travels to and throughout Cuba. Adela Fales was an excellent assistant to Rev. Wood in the Cuban missionary endeavor. They worked together from 1884-1890, based in Centafugos, traveling across the island to share the good news.

Adela, Enrequito, pastor Wood and his wife worked side by side in sharing the good news with all who would listen. They worked in Key West and Cuba but always with the same goal: "Cuba for Christ." The trio were dependable, effective witnesses for Christ, despite strong resistance by the Cuban Catholic authorities. The trios' mission work laid the foundation for further Missionary Baptist expansion and outreach in Cuba that prospered in the twentieth century.

In the December 16, 1886, issue of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, Wood in an open letter, summed up the commitment and heartfelt need of the Cuban mission work of the Florida Baptist [State] Convention. Wood wrote: **"We have been perplexed; we have had trials; we have had disappointments; but not a shadow of doubt or distrust has darkened our path: we believe in God, and we now believe in our mission."**

[**RESOURCES:** Jerry Windsor, “The Time Has Not Yet Come,” and Jerry Windsor, “The Door to Cuba is Now Open,” articles in *The Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, 2012; Donald S. Hepburn, “Cuba for Christ,” sidebar in *Favored Florida: A History of Florida Baptists; Vol. One, 1784 – 1939*, (2013); Primitivo Delegado, *The History of Southern Baptist Missions in Cuba to 1945*,” thesis, 1947; *Florida Baptist Witness*, W. N. Chaudoin columns, July and August, 1885; *Florida Baptist Convention Annuals* of 1884 – 1890.]

Dr. Javier Sotolongo of Hialeah recipient of the 2026 Baptist Heritage Award



The Florida Baptist Historical Society’s board of directors has selected **Dr. Javier Sotolongo, of Hialeah, as the recipient of the 2026 Baptist Heritage Award.**

The selection was based upon Dr. Sotolongo’s research and writing of a document titled “Reverse Missions Among Southern Baptist Cuban Americans.” According to the Society’s managing director Donald Hepburn, **“this document provides a major contribution to the history of the growth and development of the Hispanic Baptist movement within the Florida Baptist Convention.”** He added that “Dr. Sotolongo’s research provides an additional valuable resource on Florida’s Cuban Southern Baptists.”

The Florida Baptist Historical Society’s board of directors annually selects a recipient for the **Baptist Heritage Award. The award seeks to recognize and honor those Florida Baptists who have exhibited rare and unusual dedication to the cause of Florida Southern Baptist history.** Making a significant contribution can be made through such means as researching and writing Baptist history, teaching Baptist history, preserving Baptist history, and/or promoting the importance of Florida Southern Baptist history.

The 2026 award was presented to Dr. Sotolongo during the August 30 Sunday morning worship service at the Iglesia Bautista Estrella de Belen (Star of Bethlehem Baptist Church) in Hialeah, Florida.

Dr. Javier Sotolongo has served as senior pastor of the Estrella De Belen (Star of Bethlehem) Baptist Church, Hialeah, since 1990. Under his leadership the church is committed to intentionally focusing on outreach and discipleship, which results in an increase in baptisms and renewed passion for sharing the gospel within the greater Hialeah community.

Dr. Sotolongo has earned three degrees, including the Bachelor of Arts in Theology from the Western Cuba Baptist Seminary. Subsequently, he attended and graduated with a Master of Theological Studies (with advance coursework in Missions and Evangelism) and the PhD degrees from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

A native of Villa Clara, Cuba, Dr. Sotolongo (b. 1961) migrated to the United States at age 18. He served as a church planter in Buffalo, N.Y. under the auspices of The New York Baptist Convention. Then he re-located to Florida to begin service with the

Estrella De Belen. In 2016 and 2017 he served as first vice president, Florida Baptist State Convention. He and his wife Barbara have been married since 1985 and have two adult daughters.

Thirty individuals, since 1997, have been conferred the Baptist Heritage Award by the Florida Baptist Historical Society. These persons represented a broad range of Florida Baptists including pastors, denominational workers, college and seminary professors, and laypersons, all of whom had an interest and commitment to researching and publishing Florida Baptist history.

The Florida Baptist Historical Society operates under the auspices of the State Board of Missions of the Florida Baptist State Convention, which appoints the Society's Board of Directors.

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