

History of DC Baptist Convention

The History of the Convention

"The missionary motive is older than the churches . . . and the quickening of the missionary motive is the developing influence in all (our) history."

~William Allen Wilbur, author of a book on the first 50 years of the Columbia Association of Baptist Churches.

On July 5, 1801, four months after the inauguration of Thomas Jefferson and eight months after the first meeting of Congress in the District, Baptists held their first worship service in the newly built Treasury Building (which later burned), adjacent to the White House. Eight months later First Baptist was organized.

Early denominational fellowship was enjoyed by Washington churches in the Baltimore Baptist Association, which had begun in 1793. That association's fellowship was shattered in 1836 in the anti-missions "Black Rockism" controversy, resulting in the virtual dismantling of the Baltimore Association and the immediate formation of the Maryland Baptist Union Association, which made missions endeavors rather than doctrinal controversy their object. A few Washington churches, including First Baptist Washington and First Baptist Alexandria, then in the District of Columbia, withdrew from the Baltimore Baptist Association in 1820 to form the Columbia Baptist Association in Virginia. In 1856 the Columbia and Salem Union Associations formed the Potomac Baptist Association in Virginia.

Luther Rice, a recent Baptist convert and fresh from his travels to India with Adoniram and Ann Judson, arrived in Washington in 1813, where he made his home and base of operations until his death in 1836. His greatest achievement was the binding into a spiritual union Baptists of all stripes along the Eastern Seaboard for world evangelism through the General Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions (Triennial Convention). From his Mission Press office at 923-25 E Street NW, he published the Latter Day Luminary, then the Columbian Star, the first Baptist periodical to have a nationwide circulation. He founded Columbian College, now George Washington University, in 1821. With Obadiah Brown, pastor of First Baptist, and others, he began the Baptist General Tract Society in 1824.

On November 26, 1877 six Washington churches met at the Calvary Baptist Church building to form the autonomous Columbia Association of Baptist Churches. They stated their reason for forming: to strengthen the fellowship among the churches, give greater efficiency for church extension, and "throw upon us a burden of evangelical duty . . . to watch for the purity, peace, and prosperity of the churches in Washington and its vicinity." As a precursor to this organization, in 1876, the 100th commemoration of the nation's independence, there had been a drive to raise money "to relieve our churches from building debts." By the turn of the century there were 13 churches with 5,324 members.

In 1880 the D.C. Baptist Home (now Baptist Senior Adult Ministries) was organized at the suggestion of Amelia Powell and Sara Wood, who influenced Mrs. Carter Gray to give property for this endeavor. This ministry now includes a facility at Thomas Circle, adult day care, community ministries and clinical pastoral education.

On May 16, 1920 George W. Truett "preached one of the most famous sermons [on religious liberty] ever preached by a Baptist" on the east steps of the Capital Building before 15,000 persons. The Southern Baptist Convention was meeting in Washington, but the invitation to Truett had come from Baptists in the District of Columbia.

Henry W.O. Millington served as the first Executive Secretary from 1922 to 1934. While pastor of the Brookland Baptist Church, he had been instrumental in leading the D.C. Convention to found the Baptist Home for Children in 1914 (which is located in Bethesda, Maryland, and which property was purchased from the sale of a piece of land donated by John B. Lord). Millington gave leadership to the development of the Chevy Chase (1923), Highlands (1923), and Silver Spring (1924) churches. During his tenure, emphasis was given to the "prosperity of our little churches," and strengthening of relations with both the Northern and Southern Baptist conventions.

"Baptist Headquarters" was established in 1921 in the Munsey Building, in 1924 in the Woodward Building, and in 1929 at 715 Eighth Street, N.W. In 1947 the D.C. Convention and Baptist World Alliance (BWA) jointly purchased the present property at 1628 16th Street, N.W. The BWA moved to Virginia in 1984, and it's half of the building was purchased by the D.C. Baptist Foundation.

Rufus W. Weaver, who succeeded Millington in 1934, and served as Executive Secretary until 1943, led in the change from an association to the District of Columbia Baptist Convention. His vision included cooperation with surrounding Baptist bodies and: "The unification of the Baptists in America, with headquarters in Washington, so that on national and international issues all the Baptist bodies may effectively express to the world their deep convictions and their fundamental principles." He led in the establishment of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

The D.C. Baptist Convention has always been related to the American Baptist Churches USA, and Southern Baptist Convention. The Northern Baptist Convention (precursor of the ABCUSA) was organized at the Calvary Baptist Church building in 1907. When the Southern Baptist Convention was founded in 1845 in Augusta, Georgia, representatives were present from Baptist churches in Washington. In 1998 the D.C. Convention became triply aligned by affiliating with the Progressive National Baptist Convention.

In 1939 the D.C. Baptist Foundation was established to encourage, receive and distribute gifts and bequests for the purpose stated by the donor, with undesignated gifts used for the work of the Convention.

In 1942 Anna B. Jochenning was appointed as city missionary, under sponsorship of the Woman's Missionary Union. She was director of the old Baptist Christian Center on Eighth Street, Southeast. It was said of her, "No child is really underprivileged who has ever been taught by Mrs. Jochenning." Retiring in 1957, the Jochenning Baptist Community Center was named for her.

M. Chandler Stith, successor to Weaver, served as Executive Secretary for 27 years. Under his leadership the number of churches increased from 33 to 63 and the number of church members from 25,172 to 40,049. At his retirement he was commended for strengthening churches, his contributions to Baptist life on a local and national level, his ubiquitous desire for reconciliation and brotherly love among ethnic communities, and his commitment to a strong witness of Baptists in the nation's capital.

James A. Langley served as Executive Director from 1970 through 1991. "Racial reconciliation has been one of the main thrusts of my ministry. It is incumbent upon Christians to do all we can to overcome moral problems in the world today," said Langley. It was exemplified in his 13 years as pastor

of Pennsylvania Avenue Baptist Church and in his leadership of the D.C. Baptist Convention, where 22 African American congregations were added during his 21-year tenure. His thought-provoking editorials in the Capital Baptist were equal in quality to the best of syndicated columnists in *The Washington Post*. Under his leadership 32 churches were added, the Convention elected its first woman as president, a ministry was begun to embassy personnel, new work was established for Hispanics and Asians, and there was expansion of all the programs in the Convention.

Jere Allen served as Executive Director/Minister from 1992 through 2000. During this period the staff and officers led in the Convention becoming aligned with the Progressive National Baptist Convention; a racial reconciliation resolution was initiated by DCBC and later adopted by the SBC (1995); an historic meeting was held in the Washington area for Executive ministers and directors of ABC/USA and SBC regions and state conventions; a prayer ministry was begun for members of Congress; a five year Operation Koinonia provided start-up funds for new ministries initiated by member churches; there was a net gain of 20 churches.

Jeffrey Haggray became Executive Director/Minister on August 1, 2001. With a background in the ABC/USA and the PNBC, he is the first African-American to become an executive of a state convention in the SBC. Jeffrey comes to this position with a distinguished academic and pastoral background. He is providing excellent leadership during a time of controversy and negotiation with the North American Mission Board of the SBC.