

How SBCD Began

In 1948, Southern Baptist had been doing organized Deaf ministry for more than forty-two years. Myrtle Morris had been employed by the Home Mission Board in 1904 to work as a teacher of the Deaf in Cuba. Miss Morris was deaf herself. Her mission was short lived but John W. Michaels, also deaf, was hired by the Arkansas Baptist Convention in 1905 and by the Home Mission Board in 1906. These were pioneer efforts that would be followed by the hiring of four career missionaries and three summer missionaries in the four decades prior to December 1948. The career missionaries were Axel Oscar Wilson, Clarence Findlay Landon, Joseph Watts Gardner, and Leslie H. Gunn. The three summer missionaries were Grady Watson, John W. McCandless, and Laura J. Formwalt.

In addition to these denominational efforts, Deaf ministries of various kinds originated during the first half of the twentieth century. Michaels was responsible for about 100 of these Deaf ministries. Every thing that we are today as Deaf Southern Baptists originated in Michaels and his unsurpassed vision. But in this effort of planting Deaf ministries he was greatly assisted by the persons listed above and by numerous lay people, both hearing and deaf.

Some of these lay people Michaels had enlisted as volunteer workers like Harvey Drake in Washington D.C. and Maryland, Amon P. Bass in Virginia, Mr. and Mrs. W. C. Fugate in Kentucky, William Hackney in North Carolina, Mrs. Laura Formwalt in Tennessee, Herbert Smoak in South Carolina, and Joseph W. Gardner in Texas. These people served as "volunteer" missionaries in their prospective states. By 1948 there were solid Deaf ministries planted all over the South and strong lay leaders in every southern state.

By 1948, a number of churches with strong Deaf leaders and capable hearing interpreters had risen to positions of influence. These interpreters, all of them children of Deaf parents, included Lillian Beard, Miriam Johnson, Bertie Mae McDonald (Hiner), Laura Formwalt, and Fay Osborne Lanham. These women kept in touch with each other by mail and encouraged each other. The Home Board missionaries, especially J. W. Gardner (and Laura Formwalt in the summer time) traveled throughout the South encouraging the many and various Deaf ministries and their ministry leaders. When the Southwide Conference of the Baptist Deaf started, these many ministries and these lay leaders provided the primary impetus for its founding.

It should be noted that a second impetus for the founding of the Southwide Conference came from the natural inclination that Deaf people have for creating institutions for cultural support. Deaf society in America began in 1817 with the founding of the first permanent school for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. Within a few years, Deaf organizations and institutions of all kinds began. These included church societies, education societies, and social clubs of all kinds. The National Association of the Deaf began in 1880. It still exists today and is a major influence on all parts of Deaf life in America. Several organizations began in the South having major religious emphasis. These organizations influenced the beginning of a Southern Baptist national body. The Dixie Association began in 1928. It was a bit of a reaction by Southern Deaf people against the NAD leadership. This body began with strong religious flavor but

within a few years the religious flavor was gone and infighting tore the association apart.

Of more important was the North Carolina Sunday School Association. This group formed in 1936 and lasted for several decades. Each year Deaf people from around North Carolina would meet for Bible study like a large state wide Sunday School.

The organization that seems to have had the most influence on the founding of the Southwide Conference was the Monette Association. The Monette Association began in 1927. It was a one day conference in Monette, Missouri that met annually. It lasted well into the second half of the century. From its earliest days, Michaels, Wilson, and Landon were regular attendees and speakers. There is no direct connection between the Monette Association and the Southwide Conference but many Deaf Southern Baptist were familiar with the Monette meeting, and when the Southwide Conference began encouraging states to begin their own conferences they were all encouraged basing their individual constitutions on the Monette Conference constitution. The Monette conference provided a type of model for the Southwide Conference.

The immediate cause for the beginning of the Southwide Conference is not completely clear. Several factors all seemed to have come together at once to “make it happen.” Gardner was traveling all over the South meeting isolated workers and hearing about their problems. Laura Formwalt was doing this also during the summer months. Everyone would tell Gardner that they wanted to meet the others working with the Deaf around the South. Gardner talked with many of them about having some kind of southwide meeting.

The Southern Baptist convention met in Memphis in May 1948. Gardner, who usually went to the Convention meetings, attended this one. While in Memphis he visited with the Memphis Deaf group at First Baptist Church. The pastor of First Baptist was Dr. R. Paul Caudill. Caudill had dreamed of having a Deaf ministry as part of his church. He had met Deaf people at Ridgecrest and learned some Signs (from Laura Formwalt). Caudill’s wife had also become acquainted with Deaf people when she lived across the street from Gallaudet University. Caudill had worked with a Memphis Deaf leader by the name of William L. Asbridge to move the existing Deaf ministry in Memphis to First Baptist Church in October of 1945. Caudill and Asbridge had been the motivating factors in the Memphis church.

Caudill brought Fay Osborne to Memphis to interpret for the deaf group. She was a student at Southwestern Seminary and at first had flown back and forth to Memphis from Fort Worth every week end. By 1948, Fay Osborne had become Fay Lanham, and she had become the permanent interpreter and Deaf ministry worker at First Baptist, Memphis. Asbridge, Gardner, Lanham, and Caudill were the major instigators for the forming of the Southwide Conference which in time would become the Southern Baptist Conference of the Deaf.

A few years after the 1948 meeting, Leonard Asbridge recorded his memory of the forming of the Conference. Here are his words:

In was May 1948, during the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Memphis, Rev. J. W. Gardner dropped in for a visit with the First Baptist church Silent Department. It was at that time I was asking him questions about the Southern Baptist Convention, finally a God-sent idea popped up, I asked Bro. J. W. Gardner what would be his opinion of organizing a Southern Baptist convention of the deaf in the Southern field, holding annual meetings. I gave the point that it would promote Christian fellowship,

Bible study, workshops and get the experience of forming Christianity with new deaf people. It could lead many deaf to know Jesus Christ for the first time in their lives. Rev. Gardner became excited and enthusiastic over the idea. He wanted to talk more about it, so he came to our deaf department again the following month and I had the opportunity to invite him to have dinner with my wife, Doris, and myself so we would have more time in planning and after dinner we talked and discussed many matters about what to be done first, it lasted late in the evening. He gave me names and addresses of churches that have ministry to the deaf and their leaders. First I wrote a letter and let him read it and make it to his best appealing, then typed copies of the letter and mailed to 40 or more churches in the Southern area. In reply, I received more than 40 letters which many churches said they were willing to send representative if any further meetings to organize a Southwide Baptist Conference of the Deaf. All the churches with a ministry to the Deaf were full of enthusiastic and for it.

Rev. Gardner continued his monthly visits to our department of the deaf and we planned a little bit by bit until around June and July the plans were almost shaped and ready for a "GO-AHEAD." Rev. Gardner talked the matters over with Miss Faye Osborn, now, Mrs. Lanham. She and Rev. Gardner had a talk about it and decided that it was a good thing. So they decided to go to the office of Dr. R. P. Caudill and seek his advice on the idea. He, Dr. Caudill, thought the idea would be workable with the deaf in the Southern area, in fact among all the deaf. Dr. Caudill offered First Baptist Church as host to the first meeting and organizing of the new-born, Southwide Conference of the Baptist Deaf. Dates were set for the first meeting as of December 28, 29, 30, 1948.

These memories may have some slight errors and surely there are some omissions, but for the most part the memory of Leonard Asbridge is accurate.

It is simply amazing to see God's hand through history. John Michaels, had led deaf people to Christ all over the South. Lillian Beard's adoptive parents were two of those converts. He had also founded deaf ministries including the one in Nashville, where Fay Lanham's parents went to church. Lanham's aunt, Laura Formwalt (who led the deaf ministry in Knoxville also founded by Michaels) had led Leonard Asbridge to Christ when he was a boy attending the Tennessee School for the Deaf in Knoxville. Beard, Lanham, and Formwalt were major influences on J. W. Gardner's life and ministry. The Southern Baptist Conference of the Deaf did not spring up out of thin air. God had been working in the lives of men and women and in churches for decades. All these came together in December of 1948.

Plans were made, invitations were sent, messengers took train. That was the way people traveled over long distances in 1948. They came from Texas, Georgia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and of course, Tennessee. All of them were excited and expectant. They did not know quite what they were doing. They likely had some sense of the historic. Probably no one in the group dreamed of the SBCD that would come to be.

Most everyone left their homes on Tuesday, December 28. Trains traveled over night. Carey Shaw tells of leaving Houston, Texas on Tuesday evening and arriving in Memphis at 6:30 Wednesday morning. Shaw was the first of the travelers to arrive at First Baptist Church. By 9:30 most everyone was there.

Gardner, as southwide missionary, knew everyone. He was the one in the group who traveled. He had spent time with all the messengers in their home churches. He introduced everyone and the first session began. Gardner opened the meeting with prayer. R. Paul Caudill, pastor of the host church, welcomed everyone.

The new body had to have some organization. Leaders were needed. Gardner was elected president and Lanham was elected secretary. The group discussed procedures for making reports. They also discussed and decided to have regular annual meetings. They voted to meet the following December at Central Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. (That meeting did not occur.)

It is interesting to note, though, they did not decide on a name for the organization. The minutes begin with the caption "BAPTIST WORKERS CONFERENCE FOR THE DEAF." Carey Shaw in his report to his church on the meeting called it the "Southern Baptist Conference of Workers of the Deaf." The Memphis newspaper, *The Commercial Appeal*, reported on the meeting. They called the new organization the "Southern Baptist Conference of Deaf Workers." The name seems to have been flexible for several years. The program for 1951, the first printed program, called the organization "Southwide Conference of Baptist Deaf." The minutes for that same year were titled, "SOUTHWIDE BAPTIST CONFERENCE FOR THE DEAF." As early as May, 1952 a few people called it "Southern Baptist Conference of the Deaf." (Southern Baptist Bulletin for the Deaf, Vol 1, No 6, Page 1) However, the minutes clearly reflect that the name officially became the "Southern Baptist Conference of the Deaf" at the Memphis meeting June 12, 1954. Dr. R. Paul Caudill, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Memphis, suggested that the name be changed. Mrs. Laura Formwalt acted on Caudill's suggest and offered a motion for the name change. The motion passed. The organization has carried that name ever since.

During the first session on that fateful Wednesday, each of the representatives spoke. They told about their individual church ministries. They described their needs. The needs described are as contemporary as today. Mrs. Garrett of Columbus, Georgia said "the deaf are so worldly and need Christ, but no one to teach them..." Mrs. Embry of Louisville, Kentucky described a problem with keeping up with deaf people when they moved to new cities. Mrs. Brittain of Atlanta, Georgia pleaded that "We must preach and teach as never before." Mr. Truett George of Louisville, Kentucky bemoaned the fact that he had difficulty "getting the deaf to understand church loyalty."

Beginning on Wednesday afternoon, the conference had several formal and "informal" presentations. Mrs. Wright spoke on "Christianizing Deaf People for Work Among the Deaf and Christian Education." Even at this early point Mrs. Wright was communicating with Southern Baptist seminaries asking for help from them to educate deaf ministry workers. She had been raising money for that very purpose.

Mrs. Formwalt gave a convincing appeal for Deaf people to attend Ridgecrest. For several years, Formwalt had been attending Ridgecrest during Sunday School week and taking Deaf people with her. She had been interpreting and teaching at Ridgecrest and it was her conviction (which others shared) that Ridgecrest would do great things for Deaf people and for the new Deaf Conference. Carey Shaw had the final presentation. It is not clear if he spoke Wednesday afternoon or Thursday morning. The official minutes indicate Thursday morning. Shaw's own recollection was that he spoke on Wednesday. Shaw spoke on the topic of "Christianizing the Social Life of Our Deaf People." He

called for Christian recreation to help keep Deaf people in the church.

The conference attended prayer meeting that Wednesday night at First Baptist Church and took over the program. Several of the conference attendees helped lead the prayer meeting. Gunn, Jones, George, and Mrs. Brittain all spoke at prayer meeting. Rev. Gardner lead the program. The first day ended. Everyone went home with members of First Baptist to spend the night and to prepare for Thursday.

Whatever else may have happened on Thursday, this part is certain; the whole group took time to discussed their problems and concerns. Lanham led a discussion on the need for special literature and teaching aids. Robert Marsden and Leslie Gunn led a discussion on the need for deaf camps. Every part of the ministry was put on the table.

And then the records of the first meeting end abruptly. There is no indication of things “winding down.” The records simply say the whole conference went sight seeing around Memphis and ate dinner at Fay Lanham’s house. A second night was spent in Memphis homes and early Thursday morning most everyone took trains back to their homes. Two days. That’s all. But in those two days a movement was begun. A movement that has changed Southern Baptist Deaf ministry.

The persons attending that first meeting had several purposes in mind for the conference. In 1958, Dr. Jack Roddy, Superintendent of the Home Mission Board’s Deaf work, asked Fay Lanham to write an article for *The Deaf Southern Baptist* to explain the purposes of SBCD. (*The Deaf Southern Baptist* was a newsletter that Roddy edited.) She wrote, “Dr. Gardner felt a great need of getting workers in the local churches, both deaf and hearing -- teachers, interpreters, and missionaries -- together for exchange of ideas, for the discussion of our mutual problems, that we might better coordinate our work over the field and also have a period of spiritual fellowship together.” (*The Deaf Southern Baptist*, Vol 1, No 2, April-June, 1958, p.1)

The By-laws now list seven purposes. These are: (1) To provide a vehicle for obeying the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20) with respect to deaf people by personal witnessing, evangelism, home missions, foreign missions, and discipleship; (2) To provide opportunities for training in local church settings, in state conferences, and on the national level to help equip people in all aspects of the deaf ministry; (3) To assist deaf persons with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and deaf persons, interpreting the needs and functions of the one to the other; (4) To provide a channel of communication within the Southern Baptist deaf community; (5) To provide an understanding of deafness and of the needs of deaf people to the community at large; (6) To provide opportunities for inspirational worship experiences; (7) To provide opportunities for Christian fellowship.

In these many years, the purpose has expanded but basically it has remained the same. It is still an organization for Deaf people and Deaf ministry workers to get together for missions, fellowship, worship, and mutual benefit all for the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. Time alone will tell if SBCD will stay true to its purposes and to the vision of its founders. Many years from now perhaps a later generation will look back upon us and call us “faithful.”

Written by Donnie Wiltshire

(Taken mostly from his book “A Celebration of Fifty Years: The Southern Baptist Conference of the Deaf, 1948-1998,” Published by DJL Ministries, 1998, printed 2007.)