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## Historical Sketch

### *Preserving the Gift of Our Heritage*

The Baptist General Association of Virginia, later renamed the Baptist General Convention of Virginia, was organized on June 20, 1899 at the historical First African Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia. This organizational meeting took place just one month following a stormy Annual Session of the Virginia Baptist State Convention, held at the First Baptist Church, Lexington, Virginia (May 10-13, 1899).

The issues that raised so much controversy at Lexington and resulted in the division were related to the control and governance of Virginia Seminary and College and the matter of compliance or non-compliance with provisions of a compact originally accepted in 1896 by the Virginia Baptist State Convention, the American Baptist Home Mission Society, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Virginia Baptist General Association (white).

The compact stipulated that African American Baptists of Virginia would raise \$15,000.00 to be used for the building program at the newly formed Virginia Union University (Richmond) and, \$20,000 to be used to liquidate the debt at Virginia Seminary and College (Lynchburg). Members of the Virginia State Baptist Convention and supporters of Virginia Seminary and College were unhappy with the compact. They felt the compact proposed that the funds for the building program at Virginia Union would have priority over those to be used for debt liquidation at Lynchburg Seminary and College. Some members of the Virginia State Baptist Convention were convinced that the time had come for Negroes to both own and manage their own schools as well as chart their future without direction from whites. They felt that the American Baptist Home Mission Society especially sought not only to reduce the status of Virginia Seminary, but also to relegate it to an affiliate institution of Virginia Union, thereby destroying its racial identity.

For these reasons, some members of the Virginia Baptist State Convention and Virginia Seminary supporters rejected the compact in 1899 at its Annual Session in Lexington. This group became known as "*Race Men*".

On the other hand, another group advocated honoring the compact and all of its provisions. These persons were convinced that Virginia Union was destined to become a grand and powerful institution in raising the Negro's status in Virginia and throughout the United States. They further believed that the educational destiny of Virginia Union could be best served by cooperating with the Home Mission Society and other interested groups. These Virginia Union and compact supporters became known as "*Co-operationists*." Following what came to be known as the "Battle of Lexington", this group withdrew from the Virginia Baptist State Convention. From among this group came the organizers of the Baptist General Association of Virginia. Dr. R. Wells, pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Richmond, was elected as the first president of this new body.

The first Annual Session of the newly formed Baptist General Association (Colored) of Virginia was held October 18-20, 1899 at the 8th Street Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, with representation from thirty-two churches, one missionary society and one association. A total of fifty delegates attended this first Session. Income raised was \$823.36. (From an unpublished thesis by Frank P. Lewis, *History of BGA (Coloured), 1937*, Virginia Union University Library.) Guided by the hand of God and led by visionary and resourceful leaders, the Baptist General Association of Virginia (Colored), later renamed the Baptist General Convention of Virginia, developed and grew in outreach, finance, and structure during the years between 1900 and 1946. Some giant strides taken included:



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- The Baptist General Association (Coloured) endorsed a recommendation that there should be an organization of women of the state to act as an auxiliary. This idea came to fruition on June 19, 1900 at the Sharon Baptist Church, Richmond, when the Women's Baptist Missionary and Education Association, now known as the Division of Women, was formed, with Mrs. Margaret Rose Johnson as president. This group has given excellent ongoing leadership in support of the objectives of the Convention. Its energies and leadership have specifically been devoted to the missionary ministry endeavors in churches across the State.
- Through the effort and foresight of the Women's Association, the Junior Department, now Division of Youth, was organized in 1923. Its first Annual Session was at Virginia Union University in 1924, with Mrs. Alice Spindle of Richmond as president.
- Between 1900 and 1945, the State Sunday School Convention and the Baptist Young People's Union (BYPU), already in existence, chose to become affiliated with Baptist General Convention. These two groups did much to unify the Baptist efforts in Virginia and to bring all forces together in spirit, work and understanding.
- During these formative years, Baptist General reached beyond the borders of the United States in its outreach and missions to funnel its support of foreign missions through the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Missions Convention. During the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Session of Baptist General Convention in 1902, held at the First Baptist Church, Farmville, an offering of \$61.77 was presented to the corresponding secretary of Lott Carey, Dr. W. M. Alexander. Support of the Lott Carey Foreign Missions Convention has greatly increased over the years and a vital cooperative relationship had been maintained. Today, Virginia continues to be perhaps the strongest supporter of the Lott Carey Foreign Missions Convention.
- At its 1902 Annual Session the Baptist General Convention under took another giant step in support of education. A resolution was adopted that called for the creation of nine academies to be established throughout the associations and districts of Virginia. These secondary schools were to be financially supported by the Convention in the amount of \$200.00 each per year. Controlled and owned by the black Baptists of Virginia, these schools were managed by a board of trustees that was appointed jointly by the local associations and the Baptist General Convention. The last of these schools, located in Charlotte County, closed around 1958.

With approximately only six State supported public school in Virginia for Negroes at that time, these academies were desperately needed to provide basic secondary educational opportunities. Approximately four other private black schools, already in existence, were accepted for affiliation with the Baptist General Convention of Virginia. From these institutions came many graduates who made significant marks in numerous fields of endeavors, especially teaching and preaching.

- In 1946, Baptist General underwent a significant structural change that represented a real faith commitment. In that year a proposal drafted by Dr. Harvey N. Johnson and others was adopted. This proposal urged that black Baptist forces would unify under one umbrella for a more effective ministry. The Women's Baptist Missionary and Education Association, the Sunday Convention and the Baptist Young People's Union agreed to cooperate under a unified



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plan of cooperation. Structurally, this cooperative initiative became known as the Baptist Allied Bodies. Dr. Charles L. Evans, pastor of the Zion Baptist Church in Petersburg, Virginia, accepted this challenge to coordinate Baptist forces in Virginia as the Executive Secretary. This was a great faith step on his part.

- In 1947, Baptist General joined forces with the Virginia Baptist State Convention, from whom it had split in 1899, and with the Virginia Baptist General Association (white) to begin a ministry of providing food, clothing and shelter for homeless children. This cooperative effort culminated in the beginning of the Baptist Children's Home of Virginia Baptists, Inc., in Petersburg, Virginia. Hundreds of homeless and needy children have been blessed because of this existence of this facility.

Located on 265 acres of land, Mrs. Janice Mack led the churches in Virginia in constructing a multipurpose on the grounds of the Children's Home in 1996. The facility is used by a variety of churches and community groups. In 2000, Mrs. Mildred Tucker succeeded Mrs. Mack as Executive Director of the Children's Home.

### **Ministry With Children and Youth**

The Baptist General Convention of Virginia has maintained a vital interest in addressing the needs of its youth and children. In addition to its work with youth through the Sunday School Convention, the BYPU and the Junior Department, already mentioned, the Convention developed Camp Carey for girls, in 1945, on a site provided by the Women's Missionary Union of Virginia (white) on Swift Creek near Colonial Heights, Virginia. Mrs. Lena Smith was named the first director. Through similar cooperative efforts, Camp H. N. Johnson for boys started in 1946 at a site known as Camp J. R. Thomas, owned by the Future Farmers of America, also located in Chesterfield County.

A Youth Commission emerged in the mid-1960's that was charged with the responsibility of planning and implementing a statewide Youth Day each year. In 1977, Youth Day was expanded to include a youth retreat at the Eagle Eyrie Baptist Assembly Conference Center in Lynchburg, Virginia. This retreat began with an attendance of approximately 300. It has grown to one separate weekend for junior high youth (900-1000 in attendance) and two senior high weekends with approximately 1200 in attendance and 700-800 in attendance, respectively.

The first recognized Youth Director was the Reverend H. G. Knight in the mid 1950's. This position, expanded in the 1970's, was staffed by Dr. Robert L. Pettis, Sr. and subsequently followed by seven others. The Reverend Leo Whitaker was the first full time director.

In 1984, the Division of Youth began sponsoring "BGC Day" at Kings Dominion for the purpose of the development of relationships and fellowships among the youth of Virginia. This occasion has proven to be quite popular with over 4000 in attendance.

### **Christian Education**

Born out of support for Virginia Union University and its School of Theology, the Baptist General Convention of Virginia has continued to be a promoter of Christian education.

After her tenure as president of the Women's Convention, Mrs. Lena Smith was named "field worker" for Christian Education. Often utilizing local persons as adjunct staff, Mrs. Smith traveled throughout Virginia conducting Christian Education classes and workshops. Through her efforts,



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missionaries, church school teachers, leaders, ushers, choir members, and others took advantage of the opportunity to study and grow in churchmanship and discipleship.

In the mid 1970's, a Director of Christian Education was officially hired to coordinate the Convention's Educational Ministry as well as the Church School Congress. The Reverend Paul Clark, Dr. Gloria Taylor, and Mrs. Sheryl Blowe-McDowney have filled this position. Christian Education teams have been developed and effectively used in conducting workshops, retreats and conferences in the local church, for associations, and statewide events.

The Christian Education Congress, formally known as the Church School Congress began to hold its educational events in conjunction with the Annual Session of the Baptist General Convention in the late 1970's. Thus, providing expanded opportunities for learning and growth for messengers, their churches, their associations, and Baptist General. From the 300 persons who attended the first Annual Session, messengers now number over 2100, who attend the Annual Session and Congress of Christian Education.

In cooperation with the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University, Baptist General created the Evans-Smith Leadership Training Institute in 1983 in order to continue developing competent and efficient church leaders.

Other activities of the Baptist General Educational Ministries include several annual statewide events - Superintendents' and Christian Educators' Symposium, ThemeThrust Conference, Grantwriting Training, Prison Ministry Forum, Curriculum Conference; and, regional teacher and leader training. A Christian Education Award was instituted to keep Christian Education at the forefront of the church's ministry and to recognize churches and associations who are striving for excellence in their teaching ministry.

Baptist General's Educational Ministry continues to be creative and innovative in enabling and equipping persons to live a lifestyle of being committed followers of Jesus Christ; and to identify Christian Education as that ministry which under girds every ministry in the church.

### **Ministry With Men**

In order to challenge the men of Virginia and provide an avenue through which they can utilize their skills and talents in promoting the cause of Christ, Christian stewardship and support for their local congregations, a Division of Men was created in 1977, with Mr. James H. Taylor as the first president. Through this structure and the more recent regional format, men in the local churches and associations are setting new heights in loyal support of objectives and causes that meet needs today. In 2006, the mission of the Division was expanded to include Outreach to Young Men, Men's Health Forums, Emergency Preparedness and Marriage and Couples Ministry.

### **Operations Ministry**

In 1992, the Baptist General Convention of Virginia took occupancy of its current Operations Center located on the campus of Virginia Union University. The Convention provides a multi-faceted ministry through its Executive Minister, The Reverend Cessar L. Scott and the staff consisting of Director of Christian Education, Mrs. Sheryl Blowe-McDowney; Director of Youth and Young Adults, The Reverend Shaun Jones; Director of Women's and Wellness Ministries, Mrs. Barbara Crump; Director of Men's Ministry, Dr. Elijah Burke; Administrative Secretary, Mrs. Connie Williams-Crump; a Ministry Assistant, 12 AmeriCorps Members, two Office Support



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Personnel, Operations Assistant, three student interns, and a Building Engineer. The ministry staff serves the Convention, associations and local churches through workshops, consultations, pulpit supply, written resources, etc.

#### ***Mission Objectives and Shared Ministries***

The BGC mission objectives are Virginia Union University and its Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology (renamed Founder's Day 1998 in memory of one its former Presidents), the Children's Home of Virginia Baptists, Inc., the Lott Carey Foreign Missions Convention, and the two predominately African American national Conventions - the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc. and the Progressive National Baptist Convention, Inc.

Additionally, the Baptist General Convention of Virginia participates in shared ministry with the Chaplains Service of the Churches of Virginia, NAACP (State Chapter), United Negro College Fund, Virginia Council of Churches and, Virginia One Church One Child. The NAACP, Virginia Council of Churches and Virginia One Church One Child are housed in the BGC Operations Center.

#### ***Summary***

The history, growth and development of the Baptist General Convention of Virginia are a saga of faith in God. Through external cooperation across racial and cultural lines, internal cooperation with other bodies within the state, in pursuit of excellence and a willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit, BGC remains on the cutting edge of change.

In its 104<sup>th</sup> Annual Session and Congress of Christian Education meeting at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Reston, Virginia, the constituents of the Baptist General Convention of Virginia elected its first female President, the Reverend Dr. Patricia Gould-Champ. Dr. Champ is the pastor of the Faith Community Baptist Church in Richmond; and, a professor at the Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology at Virginia Union University.

The pilgrimage of Baptist General has indeed been a faith journey on which God called God's people; the people responded by demonstrating their readiness to follow their lord and Savior Jesus the Christ. Courageous, visionary and unselfish leaders have been out front leading the charge. Persons named and unnamed at this writing have had a tremendous impact on the development and course of the Baptist General Convention of Virginia. To those noble visionary persons, who through faith, born strength out of weakness, looked for a city that has a foundation whose builder and maker is God, we say thank you - we owe you a huge debt of gratitude. To those visionaries who will continue to preserve the magnificent gift of our heritage in centuries to come, may the presence of the Spirit of God always empower and bless all is done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.