

This masculine emphasis in religion would continue to pervade the ranks of revivalists and fundamentalists in America. Jones's successor in the halls of muscular Protestantism was the evangelist William Ashley "Billy" Sunday (1863-1935). A former professional baseball player, an occupation which carried its own stress upon physicality and off-the-field romps, Sunday set aside meetings for men only during his revivals. He, like Jones, would occasionally employ slang and address sexual subjects as an effective means of captivating his male audience. By running across the stage, jumping in the air, simulating a baseball pitch or a slide into second base, or shadow-boxing the devil on stage, Sunday proved to the young men in the audience that a Christian man was not delicate and sedated.

Later fundamentalist preachers would also hold forth manhood as the sure result of a Christian commitment, some even going so far as to say that a literal exegesis of the Bible was far more virile and straightforward than the mawkish vacuity of modernistic biblical interpretation practiced by liberal Protestants. Although his influence did not exceed that of Billy Sunday's, and the content of his preaching did not approach the greater doctrinal sophistication of legalistic fundamentalists, Sam Jones was one of the pioneers of muscular Christianity, at least in the South.

"A Foreign Mission at Home": The Georgia Baptist Convention and Latino Missions in Georgia, 1960-2000

BY DAVID T. MOON, JR.

In 1964, the *Christian Index*, the periodical published by the Georgia Baptist Convention, estimated that there were only three thousand Spanish-speaking people in the state of Georgia, a majority of them refugees from Cuba.¹ This number remained relatively steady until the late 1980s and 1990s when the state witnessed an influx of Spanish-speaking people, many of whom were drawn by the wages offered in the construction industry in the Atlanta area; the carpet, poultry, and meat processing industries of North Georgia; and the agriculture and coastal industries of South Georgia. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, Georgia had 108,922 persons of Hispanic origin.² By 2000, Latinos made up 5 percent of the total population of the state with 435,227 people, an increase of three hundred thousand in ten years.³ The Georgia Baptist Convention, Georgia's largest Protestant denomination with 1,363,994 members in 2000,⁴ recognized the need to initiate a missionary endeavor among the state's Spanish-speaking people.

¹"Add Spanish Worker," *Christian Index* (October 22, 1964): 11 (hereinafter cited as *CI*).

²U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Persons of Hispanic Origin, Georgia," 1990, Washington, D.C.

³U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Race, Hispanic or Latino, and Age: 2000, Georgia," 2000, Washington, D.C.

⁴"2000 Annual Church Profile: A Georgia Baptist Year in Review," *CI* (April 26, 2001): 2.

MR. MOON is a graduate student at Georgia State University. He would like to thank Dr. Reinaldo L. Román and Rev. Jerry K. Baker for their help.

Beginning in the 1960s, the Georgia Baptist Convention along with its member churches and associations sought to aid and minister to the rising Latino population.⁵ Their efforts have proven fruitful, as from the mid-1960s to 2000 the number of Latino missions has multiplied from two to approximately seventy.⁶ Since work with Latinos began in 1964, the Georgia Baptist Convention, in cooperation with its member associations and churches, has employed two methods in ministering to the Latinos, those of social relief and evangelical ministries. These methods have caused both Latinos and whites to confront religious, familial, and social issues prevalent during the period.

In the late 1950s the Southern Baptist Convention, the national organization in which the Georgia Baptist Convention holds membership, recognized the benefit and potential of missions to non-English-speaking people in the United States. Beginning in 1958, the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention adopted the Language Groups Ministries, an agency of the Texas Baptist Convention. The Home Mission Board provided 30 percent of funds, while the state convention of Texas provided 70 percent. The program's intent was to encourage the establishment and growth of language churches and missions in the nation and to lead English-speaking congregations to minister to persons of non-English languages and culture.⁷ The alliance between the Home Mission Board and state convention agency proved fruitful, as Southern Baptists exhibited enthusiasm toward the opportunities to minister to non-English speaking people. The *Annual* for the 1960 session of the Southern Baptist Convention reported that four states entered into new language fields, but Georgia was not among those participating.⁸ Georgia Baptists did not take part

⁵Georgia Baptist Convention, *Minutes* (1964): 141, Georgia Baptist History Depository, Special Collections, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University, Macon, Georgia (hereinafter cited as GBC and GBHD).

⁶Approximately sixty missions are listed in "Georgia Baptist Convention Report of Receipts," *CI* (September 14, 2000): 15-22; Jerry K. Baker estimates about seventy in 2000, interview with the author, March 21, 2001 (hereinafter cited as Baker Interview). Rev. Baker is the Language Mission Ministries specialist at the Georgia Baptist Convention.

⁷*Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, s.v. "Language Missions, Home Mission Board Program of." (Nashville, Tenn., 1971).

⁸Lloyd Corder, "V. Program of Language Group Ministries," in the Report of the Home Mission Board (hereinafter cited as HMB), in Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), *Annual* (1960): 161-62.

because the Latino mission field did not exist in the state until the mid-1960s.

Missions aimed at non-whites was not a novel idea among Georgia Baptists. Organized in 1822 as a means for the Baptists in the state to join with one another in such areas as domestic and foreign missions, the Georgia Baptist Convention sponsored two basic state missions aimed at non-whites: those for Native Americans and those for African slaves. Although these missionary endeavors occurred early in the life of the convention, the majority of twentieth-century Georgia Baptists seemed willing to support missions aimed toward a new ethnic and racial group entering the state.⁹ In response to the presence of several Cuban Baptists who had come to Atlanta as refugees, and Puerto Rican soldiers stationed at Fort Benning in Columbus, the Georgia Baptist Convention's

State Mission Program was expanded . . . to provide ministers . . . to the Spanish-speaking people of Georgia. . . . Rev. Abdiel J. Silva was called as a minister to the Spanish-speaking people of [the] state. [This ministry is] conducted in cooperation with the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.¹⁰

The first wave of refugees in the 1960s brought Cuban Baptists and evangelicals to Atlanta.¹¹ The first Spanish-speaking missions were not begun by the Georgia Baptist Convention or its churches, but by Latinos themselves. Previous to the arrival in 1964 of Reverend Silva, himself a Cuban exile, many of the refugees had been meeting at Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, east of Atlanta, for Sunday School and worship services. Oscar I. Romo of the Language Missions Department of the Home Mission Board served as the part-time pastor and worship leader of the group. Although church members allowed the refugees to use their building for worship in Spanish, this was not the only such arrangement in the city. After the arrival of Reverend Silva, all the Spanish groups were combined into one congregation that initiated worship services at the First Baptist Church of Atlanta as the Atlanta Spanish

⁹James Adams Lester, *A History of the Georgia Baptist Convention, 1822-1972* (Atlanta, 1972), 58-59, 292, 754.

¹⁰"Language Missions" in GBC, *Minutes* (1964): 141.

¹¹Baker interview.

Baptist Mission.¹² These first missions in Atlanta were initiated and organized by Cubans who were Baptists prior to 1964, and Latinos were behind the initiative. That year the missions became part of the Georgia Baptist Convention through the State Mission Program as Language Missions, revealing a will among the convention to aid and minister to Latinos.

The main missionary mechanism used to reach the Cuban refugees in Atlanta was social relief in the form of resettlement aid. At the urging of the Southern Baptist Convention, Georgia Baptists prepared to assist in the resettlement process by providing such necessities as shelter, furniture, clothing, and employment. The Georgia Baptist Convention created the position of Cuban Refugee Chairman in 1965, and appointed Bernard D. King, the state brotherhood secretary. First among King's responsibilities was dispatching collected supplies to the Cuban Relief and Resettlement Center in Miami, Florida, which distributed the items among incoming refugees and those being resettled throughout the southeast.¹³ An article appearing in the *Christian Index* urged Georgia Baptists to confer aid as "[q]uite often the assistance does not require much financial help, since church members usually donate what is needed." Also, "[t]he government pays their transportation from Miami to the city of resettlement, and the churches help until employment is found."¹⁴ A subsequent article reported that thirty out of forty refugee families received sponsorship from Atlanta Baptist churches. The sponsorship was not limited to Cuban Baptists, but included all refugee families.¹⁵

A different situation led to the creation of a mission for Latinos in the Columbus area. The Columbus Baptist Association hosted Bible study classes of Puerto Rican soldiers stationed at Fort Benning; eventually these were organized into the Columbus Spanish Baptist Mission.¹⁶ Like the Spanish mission in Atlanta, the Columbus body was not originally founded by the Georgia Baptist Convention, but by a Puerto Rican soldier stationed at the facility

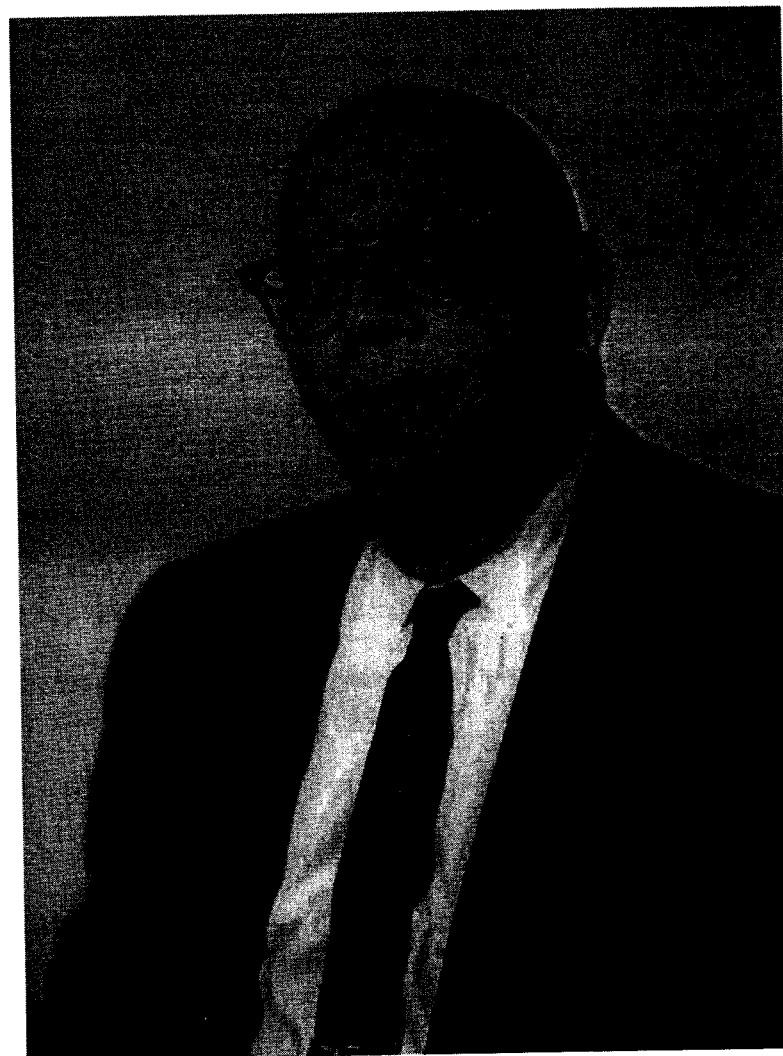
¹²Jerry K. Baker, "Ethnics in Georgia Baptist Life," *Viewpoints: Georgia Baptist History* 10 (1986): 97. Refers to mission as "Hispanic Baptist Mission."

¹³"Urge Relief For Cuban Refugees," *CI* (November 4, 1965): 7.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵"Cuban Refugees Deserve Compassion In Action," *CI* (November 11, 1965): 6.

¹⁶"Add Spanish Worker," 11.



Rev. A. J. Silva, the first minister to Spanish-speaking people in Georgia appointed by the Georgia Baptist Convention in 1964. Silva was himself a Baptist refugee from Cuba. *The Christian Index*.

named Pablo Navarro. The mission eventually did come under the wing of the Columbus Baptist Association, however. After Navarro's transfer to another base, the director of missions of the Columbus Association persuaded Crestview Baptist Church of Columbus to

adopt the group. A Sunday School teacher named Ruth Holmes volunteered to learn Spanish in order to assist, and she attended a Spanish class at Baker High School where she acquired basic communication skills. In 1968, Ada Fernández, a former missionary of the Home Mission Board to Cuba, aided Holmes in the mission work for approximately two years until being relocated to Key West, Florida. Reverend Silva also preached to the body occasionally and ministered to the congregants there.¹⁷ Evangelical ministries such as preaching and Bible study dominated the mission at Columbus.

As a majority of the Latinos entering Georgia in the 1960s were Baptists upon their arrival, conversion was not the central focus of the early Latino missions.¹⁸ Methods employed by the Georgia Baptist Convention to attract the Latinos to the missions of the convention involved social relief and evangelical ministry. Reverend Silva listed eleven methods used to reach Latinos in the late 1960s: preaching services; Bible study; Woman's Missionary Union (WMU) activities; prayer meetings; Sunday School; intensive visitation; orientation; revival services; moral and material help; fellowship gatherings; and English classes.¹⁹ Providing the displaced Cuban Baptists and Baptist military personnel with Baptist church services remained the main purpose of the early missions.

Demonstrating the unexpectedness of the arrival of the Latinos into the state and their initial independent efforts to found Spanish-speaking Baptist congregations, the Georgia Baptist Convention in 1964, when Language Missions work was created, had no intention of organizing Latino congregations as such. In fact, the *Christian Index* reported, "[p]resent plans do not call for formation of Spanish-language churches. Emphasis will be on intensifying and adapting local church programs to minister to the Spanish-speaking [people]."²⁰ A year later, there was still no intention to offer support of any permanence. As described by the *Christian Index*, "[t]he assistance given by churches is simply temporary,

¹⁷Ada Fernández, interview by Jerry K. Baker, Warner Robins, Georgia, March 14, 1985, in Baker, "Ethnics."

¹⁸Joshua Grijalva, ed., *Ethnic Baptist History* (Miami, 1992), 88-94.

¹⁹Rev. A. J. Silva, "Spanish Missions" report, Columbus Baptist Association (hereinafter cited as BA), *Minutes* (1969): 51.

²⁰"Add Spanish Worker," 11.

not a continuing obligation."²¹ Many Georgia Baptist Convention members believed that the refugees would attain a measure of independence when those resettled found employment. Although the political situation in Cuba and other Latin American countries was volatile in the 1960s, the convention also felt that Cubans as well as Puerto Rican soldiers might be returning to their homelands in the near future, which prompted Reverend Silva to remark that "[s]ome of these . . . return to their native lands with the Redemptive Message in their hearts[.]" They would then spread the Gospel among their own people, or so it was hoped.²²

Nonetheless, as time passed, it became clear that some Latinos were in Georgia permanently. The Georgia Baptist Convention had neither anticipated the arrival of the refugees nor the establishment of Spanish-speaking congregations. Despite the adversity of the situation and the difficulties in the state concerning race relations between whites and blacks, the Latino missions were accepted into the membership of the convention. Six years after Language Missions work was added to the Georgia Baptist Convention, the Atlanta Spanish Baptist Mission was already listed as a member mission of the Atlanta Baptist Association. By 1970, Rev. Jorge Comesanas was serving as pastor and seventy-eight people were enrolled in Sunday School. Equally, the Spanish Mission at Columbus was listed as a member of the Columbus Association.²³

The success of the early missions to the Latinos of Georgia cannot be measured in numbers, as there were not large numbers of Latinos in the state in these formative years. Their significance rests in the fact that the members of the Georgia Baptist Convention were able to mobilize such a mission effort, considering the organization's past encounters with racial minorities. For example, the argument over slavery within the Baptist denomination had reached its peak in 1845 when delegates were sent from Baptist churches, associations, and conventions from across the southern states to Augusta, Georgia. The result was the organization of the pro-slavery Southern Baptist Convention, which consisted of Baptists who felt God had given them the right to own slaves. Many

²¹"Urge Relief For Cuban Refugees," 7.

²²Silva, "Spanish Missions" report, Columbus BA, *Minutes* (1969): 50-51.

²³"Report of Atlanta BA," in GBC, *Minutes* (1970): 260; "Report of Columbus BA," in *Minutes* (1970): 274.



Many Latinos moved to Georgia to find jobs. Several obtained positions with the booming industrial, commercial, and residential construction businesses of Atlanta. Photo by David Moon, Jr.

cited biblical passages and patriarchs who owned slaves.²⁴ The Georgia Baptist Convention played a leading role in the organization of the new southern convention.²⁵

The early missions to the Spanish-speaking people developed in the midst of tensions over racism, especially in the Georgia Baptist Convention. In the 1960s, white Southern Baptist churches frequently denied membership to African Americans. The civil rights movement also reached its peak in this time period, becoming the source of hostilities between Southern Baptists who favored segregation and those who held a more liberal position toward integration. The Georgia Baptist Convention, according to Mark Newman, "often condemned racial prejudice and discrimination." But, "the Convention did not criticize segregation[.]" Instead, "it promoted

²⁴For example, Thornton Stringfellow, "The Bible Argument: or, Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation," in E. N. Elliott, ed., *Cotton is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright, on this Important Subject* (Augusta, Ga., 1860), 459-569.

²⁵Robert G. Gardner, *A Decade of Debate and Division: Georgia Baptists and the Formation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Macon, Ga., 1995).

acceptance of desegregation by appealing to the primary commitments Baptists held to law and order, public education and evangelism."²⁶ While not exactly radical, this stance was in stark contrast to the past actions of the Georgia Baptist Convention concerning slavery during the antebellum years and to the opinions of Southern Baptist contemporaries in other states. While one generation of Georgia Baptists fought to maintain a way of life that seems racist in modern times, another struggled to eliminate social injustices brought about by racism. The inclusion of Spanish-speaking missions as members in the convention was an example of that struggle.²⁷

The early years of the Latino missions in Georgia display two features which changed radically toward the approach of the 1970s. First, those involved in the missions were not converted after their arrival in Georgia, but were already Baptists. Second, the missions were not meant to be permanent establishments, because no one expected the Latinos to stay. The missions in Atlanta were organized mainly for the social relief of displaced refugees, while that of Columbus was founded to provide evangelical ministries to Latino soldiers. By the end of the 1960s, the Spanish-speaking missions seemed to be moving away from social support and towards actively converting new waves of immigrants. Early signs of that movement were already being seen near the close of the decade. Work was commencing in Dalton and also at the Jefferson Avenue Baptist Church of East Point, a member of the Atlanta Association, where Eneida Reyes took charge. Reyes, a former missionary to Cuba who had been imprisoned on the island, was reported to have been tortured in jail. Her nerves were worn from the experience, so her work as a missionary in Georgia was not long.²⁸

Part of the small surge in evangelism was the result of changes in the urban environment, such as increased emigration from rural areas and increased immigration of ethnic groups from every part of the globe, and the churches in the urban areas of Georgia were forced to change.²⁹ Faced with a new situation, the Georgia Baptist

²⁶Mark Newman, "The Georgia Baptist Convention and Desegregation, 1945-1980," *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 83 (Winter 1999): 683.

²⁷Newman argues that Georgia Baptists rejected *de jure* segregation and blatant racism in Georgia. *Ibid.*, 710.

²⁸Baker, "Ethnics," 98.

Convention had to prepare for the increasingly diversified racial and cultural makeup of the state. As the missions began to grow, their original intentions changed. Conversion became an eminent goal, and new programs were both developed by the convention and utilized from the Home Mission Board to reach that goal.

Missionary methods by the early 1970s were moving primarily from social relief to active evangelism. Several other churches in the Georgia Convention had adopted missions to Spanish-speaking people, demonstrating the growing support of the Latino missions. Still, these missions were organized specifically as a means of converting Latinos in Georgia. For example, a Spanish mission that had been started at Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta hired the state's first full-time pastor to Spanish-speaking people, Rev. Ruben D. Machado, a Cuban who had led several churches in Texas.³⁰ Jerry K. Baker, language-missions specialist for the convention, stated that under the leadership of Reverend Silva, ministries to Latinos were added at Carrollton in West Georgia, Marietta in the North Atlanta area, and Fort Gordon near Augusta. Rev. Pedro Pared began work with Latinos in the Macon and Warner Robins areas in 1972.³¹ Also, the Woman's Missionary Union, an auxiliary of the Georgia Baptist Convention, was already encouraging study concerning work in the field of Spanish-speaking ministries and study materials were sent to the directors of various WMUs. Devotion every week in September 1971 was centered around examining the work done by Reverend Silva and the state's Spanish-speaking population in general.³²

The progress and fruitfulness of the early missions are shown best with the original Atlanta Spanish Mission that had been meeting at the First Baptist Church of Atlanta with Rev. Jorge Comesanas as pastor. The mission was constituted as the First Spanish Baptist Church of Metro Atlanta in 1976, thus becoming one of the first foreign-language Baptist churches in contemporary Georgia. Important leaders in the constitution were Dr. Oscar I. Romo, director of the Language Missions Department of the Home Mission Board, and Dr. Daniel Sanchez, both serving as interim pas-

³⁰Kenneth Coleman, ed., *A History of Georgia*, 2nd ed. (Athens, Ga., 1991), 386.

³¹"Call Spanish Mission Pastor; Woodyard to Lilburn," *CI* (September 2, 1971): 10.

³²Baker, "Ethnics," 99.

³³Betty Dubberly, "Plan Spanish Study," *CI* (September 2, 1971): 20.

tors. The church did not have a facility of its own, but the members of North Highland Presbyterian Church in Atlanta allowed worshipers to meet there. The two pastors of the First Spanish Church served the Presbyterians, since that church was without a pastor. This situation demonstrates an unusual act of cooperation between two diverse denominations and ethnic groups.³³

In the 1960s and 1970s, the missions were very dependent on non-Georgians except for people such as Ruth Holmes of Columbus, who seemed extremely dedicated. The majority of workers hired by the convention and associations as directors and missionaries were formerly Baptist pastors in or missionaries to Latin American countries or the western United States; among them were A. J. Silva, Jorge Comesanas, Eneida Reyes, Oscar I. Romo, Ada Fernández, Ruben D. Machado, Daniel Sanchez, Benjamin Valdés, and Francisco Rivero. In 1978, Benjamin Valdés became pastor of the Spanish Mission of the First Baptist Church of Marietta and was hired as the convention's language missionary to the North Georgia region, an indication of the intention to promote evangelism and conversions in that area. Valdés was followed by Rev. Francisco Rivero in 1979.³⁴

Although the mission work with language groups in Georgia had been present since 1964 and increased in the early 1970s, it was not yet viewed with much significance, as witnessed by the exclusion of language missions from the official history commissioned for the convention's 150th anniversary in 1972.³⁵ But by the late 1970s, the missions were gaining headway. The mission effort was still strongest in Atlanta, evidenced by another new Latino mission organized at Briarcliff Baptist Church in Decatur in the late 1970s.³⁶ Also at this time, the Georgia Baptist Convention hired Jerry Baker. Though not a Latino, Baker was "responsible for work with the deaf, literacy ministry and with Spanish, Chinese and

³³Oscar I. Romo, interview by Baker, Atlanta, Georgia, November 15, 1984, in Baker, "Ethnics" (hereinafter cited as Romo interview).

³⁴Baker, "Ethnics," 100-101.

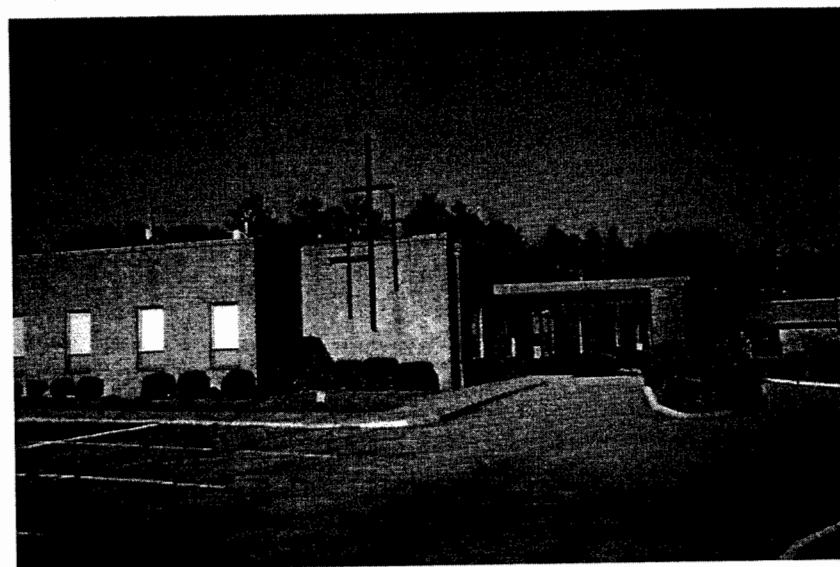
³⁵Lester, *History of the GBC*, 754; Lester neglects to mention Rev. Silva and the addition of language missions to Spanish-speaking people to the State Missions program in 1964, though work with the deaf, which was included with language missions in 1964 (*GBC, Minutes*, [1964]: 141), was mentioned.

³⁶Baker, "Ethnics," 100-101.

Arabic-speaking people."³⁷ The founding of the various new missions and the addition of Baker, who was fluent in languages besides Spanish, indicate the increase in popularity and importance of the language missions in Georgia at the end of the decade and the beginning of the next.

Important events took place during the 1980s and 1990s. By the 1980s, the Language Mission Program was elevated to departmental status in the Georgia Baptist Convention, demonstrating the importance that language missions had acquired in the state. According to Baker, the budget increased from \$41,372 in 1975 to \$372,600 in 1985.³⁸ The Hispanic population in metro Atlanta alone was 250,000 by 1985, as estimated by the Georgia Baptist Convention.³⁹ The number of Latinos in Georgia continued to swell into the 1990s as new waves of immigrants took advantage of the industries in the Atlanta area and farming jobs of South Georgia. There were an estimated thirty million Hispanics living legally in the United States during the 1990s.⁴⁰ By 1990 U.S. almost 109,000 had settled in Georgia.⁴¹

The discrepancy between the numbers provided by the convention and those by the U.S. Census is a result of statistical sampling to explain undercounts of illegal aliens and residents of slums and poor inner city communities. The growth in the Latino population during these two decades has been attributed to chain migration, where one person brought others to the place where he or she had settled. (Latinos who find jobs in Georgia often send word back home, and many more immigrants follow, sometimes whole families and villages.)⁴² Numbers of baptisms and membership among the Latino missions and churches is difficult to ascertain, as the statistical data on individual missions was often included with the sponsoring churches' totals in yearly convention and associational *Minutes* and not listed separately. The growth of the state's Latino



Iglesia Bautista Hispanoamericana, located northeast of Lilburn in Gwinnett County, is one of the largest Latino churches in Georgia, with a membership of over three hundred. The Latino church occupies a building once used by Burns Road Baptist Church, a white congregation. Photo by David Moon, Jr.

population coincides with the increase in the number of missions started between the 1960s and 2000. As of 2000, there were seventy Latino churches with approximately five thousand members in the Georgia Baptist Convention.⁴³ Thirty-four of the convention's ninety-two associations contained Latino congregations in the form of missions or churches.⁴⁴

Due to the rise witnessed by Georgia Baptists in the Latino population, many new programs were employed by the Georgia Baptist Convention in the 1980s and 1990s to target non-Baptist immigrants, such as Laser Thrust, the Baptist Mobile Health Ministry, and English as a Second Language (ESL). All three contained aspects which mingled social relief with evangelical ministry.

The Laser Thrust program was designed by the Home Mission Board (now the North American Mission Board). Its aim was to pinpoint the location of ethnic groups in urban areas and to pro-

³⁷In July 1977, Baker became the new language program leader. GBC, *Minutes* (1977): 128.

³⁸Baker, "Ethnics," 101.

³⁹Jerry K. Baker, "Ethnics in Georgia Baptist Life, 1985-1995," *Viewpoints: Georgia Baptist History* 15 (1996): 33.

⁴⁰North American Mission Board (hereinafter cited as NAMB), *Working with Hispanics*, pamphlet (Alpharetta, Ga., n.d.).

⁴¹U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Persons of Hispanic Origin, Georgia," 1990.

⁴²Mark Bixler, "Hispanics: Hometown friends, kin reunited in metro area clusters," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 15, 2001.

⁴³Baker interview.

⁴⁴"Georgia Baptist Convention Report of Receipts," *CI* (September 14, 2000): 15-22.

vide a basis for the organization of new ethnic/language missions. Modern laser teams are made up of experienced workers who penetrate a community after months of consultation, preparation, and research. Leaders among ethnic communities are identified and utilized as liaisons between the community and the convention. The findings of the Laser Thrust are used by the convention and associations alike, and after the results are compiled, a comprehensive associational language missions strategy is developed for follow-up efforts.⁴⁵ The Laser Thrust thus demonstrates the almost military-like tactics which Georgia Baptists incorporated into their plans of evangelical ministry.

During the 1990s, the Georgia Baptist Convention launched a new area of mission activity: the Baptist Mobile Health Ministry. The program is a cooperative ministry of the Baptist Medical-Dental Fellowship and the Georgia Baptist Convention.⁴⁶ The target group is migrant farm workers of South Georgia who are often unable to afford medical and dental work.⁴⁷ The unit provides free medical and dental care as well as Christian witness to "undeserved persons of Georgia."⁴⁸ The Baptist Mobile Health Ministry is at times a contact point, as the Laser Thrust, in which Latinos become acquainted with the Georgia Baptist Convention. It exemplifies the amalgamation of social relief with evangelical ministry. Similar in nature to the resettlement programs of the 1960s, the Baptist Mobile Health Ministry works to minister to Latinos through need-based programs. Different from resettlement, the goal of the Baptist Mobile Health Ministry is to win souls for Christ and bring Latinos into Georgia Baptist Latino missions and churches.

The Georgia Baptist Convention also attracts Latinos to churches and missions through ESL and literacy classes. Mission workers noted that one of the main difficulties in ministering to the Latino groups was that few people in the state could speak Spanish, and few Latinos could speak English. Free ESL classes offered at local churches sponsored by associations provide a means to teach the targeted mission group the common language of the state. The

ESL classes act as an opportunity to "share the gospel while teaching someone to speak English."⁴⁹ Moreover, Georgia Baptists also help Latinos learn to read and write Spanish through a program called Alfalit Training.⁵⁰ Jerry Baker noted that while most Hispanics in the state can speak Spanish, there are many who cannot actually read and write their native tongue. Distribution of Bibles and other tract material is useless if the target group cannot read. Baker believes that many Hispanics respond readily to literacy classes in English and Spanish, and that English classes are successful because the ability to speak, read, and write English gives immigrants an advantage in society. While not providing numbers, Baker claims that enrollment usually reaches capacity in the ESL classes offered, no matter where the location. Spanish classes are successful because they provide a way to teach people how to read their own language, so they feel their culture is not threatened.⁵¹ People who can read are less dependant on what they are told or what they hear. Thus, Georgia Baptists have utilized social relief and evangelical ministry once more as methods of ministering to Latinos.

Besides the three previously described, many other ministries have been developed by the Georgia Baptist Convention that also serve to reach out to the Latino community. These include a prison ministry at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary and the prisons at Milledgeville, youth camps, Spanish radio and television broadcasts, Bible study classes offered in Spanish, immigration assistance, and distribution of Spanish and English Bibles.⁵² A number of Latino women have also come to occupy positions in WMU.⁵³ All demonstrate aspects of social relief and evangelical ministry.

In the 1980s and 1990s, missions radiated from urban centers into other areas. For example, the Sarepta Baptist Association of Athens, Georgia, reported conducting its first Laser Thrust in April 1988. Consultants from the Home Mission Board with expertise in six language groups arrived and were assisted by Sarepta Association volunteers. The Spanish-speaking community was identified, and a Hispanic Mission was organized in 1987 sponsored by Prince Ave-

⁴⁵NAMB, *Church Planting through Laser Thrust*, pamphlet (Alpharetta, Ga., n.d.).

⁴⁶GBC, *Baptist Mobile Health Ministry*, pamphlet (Atlanta, Ga., n.d.) (hereinafter cited as BMHM).

⁴⁷Baker interview.

⁴⁸GBC, BMHM.

⁴⁹NAMB, *Literacy Missions: Spreading God's Love*, pamphlet (Alpharetta, Ga., n.d.).

⁵⁰GBC, *Literacy Missions: Can you read these words?*, pamphlet (Atlanta, Ga., n.d.).

⁵¹Baker interview.

⁵²*Ibid.*

⁵³Baker, "Ethnics 1985-1995," 36.

nue Baptist Church. The initial membership of the mission was fourteen with seventeen enrolled in Sunday School. No indication was given as to the nationality or occupations of the membership.⁵⁴ The work of the Sarepta Association identifies the spread of the mission emphasis from the larger metropolitan centers of Atlanta and Columbus to smaller urban areas, such as Athens. Further examples include the Stone Mountain Baptist Association in the southeastern metro Atlanta counties of DeKalb, Rockdale, and Newton, which began a mission in the early 1980s at Indian Creek Baptist Church near Stone Mountain, and is now a constituted church called Brazos de Amor.⁵⁵ The Chattahoochee Baptist Association, centered around Gainesville, began a Hispanic Mission in 1985 with eighteen members. Finally, the Lawrenceville Baptist Association, composed of the churches of Gwinnett County, began Glover Spanish Mission in 1983 at Glover Baptist Church near Norcross.⁵⁶ Mission activities of these associations represent the spread of Latino missions from the cities to the small urban and suburban areas.

The growth of the associations corresponds to the spread and increase in the numbers of Georgia's Latinos. In 2000, dozens of communities in Georgia reported Latino populations above one thousand. As one might expect, twenty-two cities in the Atlanta metro area were among them, three of the more outstanding being Chamblee in DeKalb County with 5,384; Gainesville in Hall County with 8,484; and Marietta in Cobb County with 9,947. Less predictably, three North Georgia cities also reported Latino populations of more than one thousand: Calhoun in Gordon County with 1,821; Dalton in Whitfield County with 11,219; and Rome in Floyd County with 3,620. The South Georgia cities of Hinesville in Liberty County, Macon in Bibb County, Tifton in Tift County, and Warner Robins in Houston County contained Latino populations over one thousand, but in less dramatic numbers. Athens in Clarke County recorded 6,402 Latinos in the area. A curious consequence of this growth pattern has been that the Latino populations of non-metropolitan cit-



Many churches in the Georgia Baptist Convention share their worship facilities with Latino congregations. Such partnerships allow Latino congregations to increase their own resources and acquire their own facilities. Photo by David Moon, Jr.

ies are now rivaling that of the larger cities. Augusta recorded 5,447 Latinos while Columbus recorded 8,368. Savannah, the largest urban center in South Georgia, recorded 2,938 Latinos. Naturally, the city of Atlanta recorded 18,720 Latinos, more than any city. The North Georgia city of Dalton recorded the second highest Latino population at 11,219, demonstrating again that the growth of the Latino population has spread outside of the urban centers of Atlanta and Columbus and into the suburbs and North and South Georgia.⁵⁷ Most of these immigrants are Catholic, and that in turn has forced the Georgia Baptists in those areas, and the Latinos moving in, to confront various religious, familial, and social issues.

⁵⁴Vicki Mims, "Language Missions Report," Sarepta BA, *Minutes* (1988): 75; Digest of Letters, Sarepta BA, *Minutes* (1988): 84-85, 111, GBHD.

⁵⁵Larry Cheek, director of missions of Stone Mountain BA, e-mail to the author, March 15, 2001.

⁵⁶Chattahoochee BA, *Minutes* (1985): 37-38, 80; Lawrenceville BA, *Minutes* (1983), GBHD.

⁵⁷U.S. Bureau of the Census, "City Race Data and Hispanic/Latino Origin, Census 2000," 2001, Washington, D.C. Other cities in the metro area are Alpharetta in Fulton County with 1,927; Buford in Gwinnett County with 1,842; Canton in Cherokee County with 1,829; Cedartown in Polk County with 2,142; College Park in Clayton County with 1,398; Conyers in Rockdale County with 1,153; Doraville in DeKalb County with 4,284; Duluth in Gwinnett County with 2,002; East Point in Fulton County with 2,998; Forest Park in Clayton County with 4,322; Hapeville in Fulton County with 1,384; Kennesaw in Cobb County with 1,344; Lawrenceville in Gwinnett County with 2,720; Lilburn in Gwinnett County with 1,495; Norcross in Gwinnett County with 3,442; Peachtree City in Fayette County with 1,184; Roswell in Fulton County with 8,421; Smyrna in Cobb County with 5,659; and Sugar Hill in Gwinnett County with 1,039. Exact figures for South Georgia cities: Hinesville, 2,769; Macon, 1,166; Tifton, 1,139; and Warner Robins, 1,856.

As the Latino missions of the Georgia Baptist Convention grew in the past twenty years, conflicts with other denominations and religions began to emerge. The following phrase appeared in the pamphlet *Literacy Missions—Can You Read These Words?*—“[the illiterate] must accept what they are told by others, including door-to-door cult visitors, politicians, salespeople, and radio or television personalities.”⁵⁸ The mention of “door-to-door cult visitors” is an obvious reference to contention with Jehovah’s Witnesses and other religions and denominations which minister through home visitation. Jerry Baker pointed to other incidents involving interreligious and interdenominational rivalry. He explained, for instance, that when the convention organizes a new mission in an area where there has been no Latino work, other denominations, especially Catholics, begin their own Latino missions in the area. But Baker emphasized that the objective of the Georgia Baptist Convention is not to lure members from other denominations but to target those who are not members of any church, or are inactive members of a particular denomination.

Concerning cooperation between Baptists and other denominations, Baker noted that the Georgia Baptist Convention works in ecumenical organizations such as the National Council of Churches, People of the Road, and the Christian Council of Metro Atlanta. Local associations and churches may also choose to cooperate with their neighbors, as seen with the case of the First Spanish Church and the Presbyterian church in Atlanta mentioned earlier.⁵⁹ According to Baker, there are some areas where Baptists cooperate with other denominations in resettlement and missionary training, and areas where Baptists choose not to cooperate. Regardless, Baker claims that numbers are not what the Georgia Baptist Convention considers important. Instead Georgia Baptists want to ensure that the members have a committed spiritual and church life.⁶⁰

Without the involvement of Latinos in the missions, the program would have been a failure. Several issues have confronted the Latino population and have at times threatened the expansion

of the missions into territory outside of the Atlanta and Columbus areas. The Georgia Baptist Convention was divided on issues such as segregation, but liberal ideas including missions to language groups eventually won over members. Concerning racism, Baker has identified the rural areas of South Georgia that have high populations of migrant workers as the most hostile to Latinos and opposed to Latino ministries, as seen by the fact that only approximately 15 percent of the Latino missions and churches are situated in South Georgia.⁶¹ Coincidentally, Mark Newman identified this part of Georgia as the most hostile to desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶² On account of the Baptist belief in individual church sovereignty, the churches are not obligated to do anything the convention says. Therefore just because the convention as a whole supports missions to Latinos, individual churches can refuse to do likewise.

Jerry Baker remembered one pastor of a small town church in South Georgia who said his church was not working with blacks, so members certainly were not going to work with “Mexicans.” Baker’s recollection demonstrates the enmity many Georgians have toward Latinos.⁶³ Some Baptists in South Georgia managed to put aside racial differences and openly organized Latino missions, such as Colquitt County Baptist Association located in the Moultrie area, Columbus Baptist Association in the Columbus area, Daniell Baptist Association in the Vidalia area, Grady County Baptist Association in the Cairo area, and Mell Baptist Association in the Tifton area.⁶⁴ The missions of those South Georgia associations have experienced numerical success. For example, Primera Iglesia Bautista in the Daniell Association reported a membership of 145 and twenty baptisms in 1999, while the Columbus Spanish Baptist Mission reported a membership of 104, numbers equal to or above other churches in their respective associations.⁶⁵

Conversion or salvation experiences among Latinos are difficult to assess. Baptists usually measure conversions by the number of baptisms reported by a church; baptism is also recognized as the

⁵⁸GBC, *Literacy Missions: Can You Read these Words?*

⁵⁹Romo interview.

⁶⁰Baker interview.

⁶¹“Georgia Baptist Convention Report of Receipts,” 15-22.

⁶²Newman, “Georgia Baptists and Desegregation,” 709.

⁶³Baker interview.

⁶⁴GBC, *Minutes* (1999): 109, 114, 134, 160.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 112, 114.

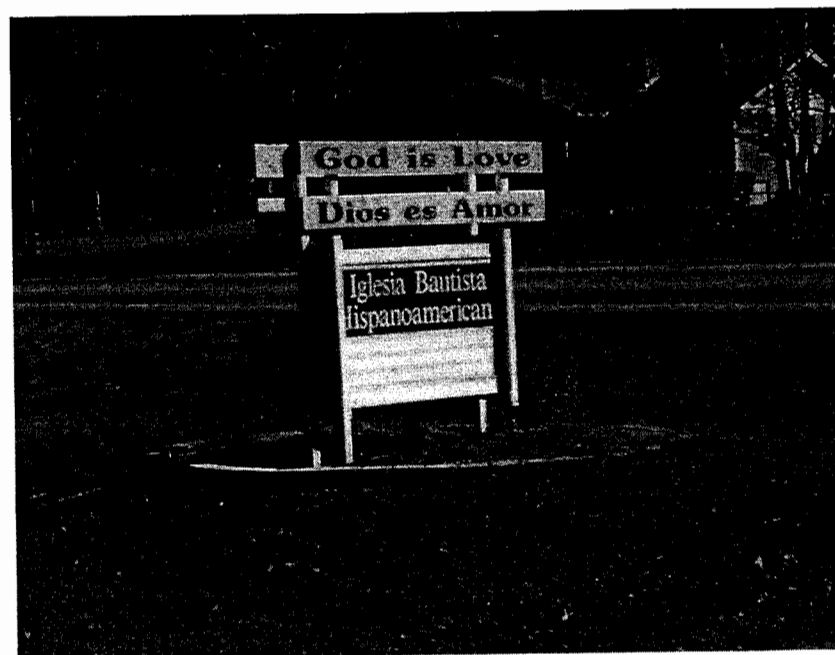
method of joining or becoming a member of a Baptist church. In 1999, approximately 260 converts were baptized into Latino missions and churches.⁶⁶ Not all Latinos who can speak of a conversion experience were baptized into a Baptist church. Jerry Baker admits that often an individual in a Latino family will be converted by a Baptist missionary, or have a salvation experience at a Latino mission or church, but forego baptism because of the fear of being ostracized by his or her family. New Latino immigrants arriving from Mexico and other Latin American countries are usually Catholic or Pentecostal and unwilling to transfer membership to a different denomination. Furthermore, many Latinos equate leaving the Catholic Church to leaving the faith.

Stories of familial obstacles to joining any Protestant churches are typical among Latinos. For example, Sidney W. Mintz wrote about attending a Pentecostal revival service in Ponce, a village in Puerto Rico, and being healed of "inguinal pain." Mintz and his companions were impressed greatly by the services of the revival, but as he commented, "After I came home, we still had no idea of joining the church. But we did talk about the things that had happened in Ponce." His family was Catholic, so joining the Pentecostal church meant utter disgrace to the relatives. Later that week, Mintz noted that one of his companions had been converted: "Elisabeth didn't dare attend any [more] service[s]. Though they were giving the services near here, it had cost her dearly to become converted, and afterward she was a little timid about going out and attending service." Mintz himself was later converted at one of these services.⁶⁷ The conflict between two denominations and within the family is evident by Mintz's account, and has played out often in the Latino Baptist missions and churches of Georgia.

As evidence of those incidents, Latino missions and churches routinely report a higher enrollment in Sunday Schools than church membership. Iglesia Bautista Hispanoamericana in Lilburn, a member of the Gwinnett Metro Baptist Association (the former Lawrenceville Association) reported a membership of 320, and a Sunday School enrollment of 430. Other examples include

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, 92-215.

⁶⁷Sidney W. Mintz, *Worker in the Cain: A Puerto Rican Life History* (New Haven, 1960), 210-13.



The sign of Iglesia Bautista Hispanoamericana indicates the importance Latinos see in being able to read both English and Spanish, as their sign pronounces "God is Love" and "Dios es Amor." However, this message is received only by those who are literate, thus stressing the significance of both English as a second language and literacy programs. Photo by David Moon, Jr.

Misión Hispana Bautista near Buford, also in the Gwinnett Metro Association, which reported a membership of sixty-four and a Sunday School enrollment of 171.⁶⁸ That phenomenon is unique in the Latino congregations attributed to family and social conflicts experienced by Latinos, as typical white churches generally experience a higher church membership than Sunday School enroll-

⁶⁸GBC, *Minutes* (1999):135-37; other examples include Iglesia Hispana de Omega of the Mell BA, whose membership was fourteen and Sunday School enrollment was thirty-four; Primera Iglesia Hispana de Tifton, Mell BA, two members, eighteen Sunday School enrolled (*Ibid.*, 160); Iglesia Bautista de Nueva Jerusalem, Gwinnett Metro BA, 141 members, 153 Sunday School enrollment; Mision Bautista Hispana Emanuel, Gwinnett Metro BA, 207 members, 273 Sunday School enrollment (*Ibid.*, 135-37); Mision Bautista El Buen Pastor, Memorial BA, seventeen members, thirty-one Sunday School enrollment (*Ibid.*, 161).

ment.⁶⁹ Hence familial difficulties have resulted in fewer number of baptisms in the Latino congregations.

Though all converted Latinos do not become members of Protestant churches, many utilize church services. (That is one of the reasons Latinos are drawn to Baptist churches.) While Catholicism is the predominate religion in Latin America, many Latinos have elected to leave the Catholic Church to join Protestant denominations, especially Pentecostal churches. The reason is amply expressed by historian David Stoll: "At issue is the Catholic structure of authority—the oldest bureaucracy in the world, dating to the Roman empire—and whether it can respond to far-reaching changes in what Latin Americans want from church life."⁷⁰ Many feel that the Catholic church and clergy tend to ignore the material and social problems of its members, a problem experienced in Cuba during the final years of Spanish rule there. Latinos tend to abandon their Catholic roots to worship in Protestant denominations that offer aid similar to the Georgia Baptist Convention's: free resettlement, free health care, and free education, to name a few.⁷¹ Despite changes in denominational affiliation, most Latinos bring with them a sense of conservatism which is stressed in the Catholic Church, for example, anti-homosexuality and female clergy.

Latinos who become members of the missions or churches of the Georgia Baptist Convention usually agree with the conservative positions of the convention. For instance, most Latinos have sided with conservative Baptists in the recent controversy over homosexuality. In 1999, two churches, Oakhurst Baptist Church of Decatur and Virginia-Highland Baptist Church of Atlanta, were ejected from the Georgia Baptist Convention as gay-affirming

churches because they allow homosexuals to serve in leadership positions and condone homosexual marriages and partnerships. The Atlanta Association, in which the two churches held membership, refused to remove the two churches from its roll, stating that it would violate the sovereignty of the individual churches. In response, both the Georgia Baptist Convention and North American Mission Board withdrew funding from the Atlanta Association in 2001 until its position changed and the churches were removed. Moreover, several conservative churches in the association discussed withdrawing to unite with other associations, while sixteen churches and two missions met at Rehoboth Baptist Church in Tucker and began the formation of a new association on April 17, 2001, called the Atlanta Association of Southern Baptists.⁷² Two Latino churches in the Atlanta Association expressed opposition to retaining the gay-affirming churches: Emanuel of Grant Park and First Spanish of Metro Atlanta.⁷³

The cases of Emanuel and First Spanish are typical among Latino Georgia Baptists. Jerry Baker pointed out that Latino congregations support other conservative measures, such as the recent resolution of the Southern Baptist Convention that only males should be pastors and deacons in Southern Baptist churches. Women can take part in the church as missionaries, Sunday School teachers, music ministers and musicians, and WMU workers. In 1999 and 2000, there were no Latino women serving as pastors or deacons in Latino missions or churches in the Georgia Baptist Convention.⁷⁴ The position of the Latinos in the Georgia Baptist Convention toward these issues indicates the solidarity between the Latinos and other conservative Georgia Baptists.

The achievements of the Latino missions and churches of the Georgia Baptist Convention cannot always be measured. To many Baptists, a small mission of twenty can be as successful as a church of three hundred members. According to Jerry Baker, measure-

⁶⁹In 2000, the number of church members of the Southern Baptist Convention was 15,960,308, while the Sunday School enrollment was 8,186,415. In 1999, the total church membership of the Georgia Baptist Convention was 1,351,456 and Sunday School enrollment was 705,895. In 2000, membership in the Georgia Convention was 1,363,994 and Sunday School enrollment was 717,600. "2000 Annual Church Profile: A Georgia Baptist Year in Review," *CI* (April 26, 2001): 2.

⁷⁰David Stoll, "Introduction: Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America," in Virginia Garrard-Burnett and David Stoll, eds., *Rethinking Protestantism in Latin America* (Philadelphia, 1993), 4.

⁷¹Louis A. Pérez, Jr., "North American Protestant Missionaries in Cuba and the Culture of Hegemony, 1898-1920," in Pérez, *Essays on Cuban History: Historiography and Research* (Gainesville, Fla., 1995), 53-72; David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley, Calif., 1990), 1-23.

⁷²William Neal, "Atlanta Association shows ambivalence in voting whether to dismiss churches," *CI* (March 29-April 11, 2001): 1, 3; Gayle White, "Local Baptist churches vote to form new group," *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 18, 2001. Joe Westbury, "Metro-Atlanta Southern Baptist Association, Jaggar elected interim moderator of new group; commitments needed by May 10," *CI* (April 26, 2001): 1; Joe Westbury, "Cooper to lead new association of 20 churches, eight missions," *CI* (June 21, 2001): 3.

⁷³Baker interview.

⁷⁴GBC, *Minutes* (1999): 92-215; Baker interview.

ments of success include whether the mission or church meets regularly and has leadership (e.g., pastors and deacons); whether it has its own building and is self-supporting; and whether a mission is eventually constituted as a church.⁷⁵ As of 1999, approximately 30 percent of the Latino congregations were constituted churches.⁷⁶ As those terms of measurement of success apply to approximately 90 percent of Latino missions and churches, the ministries of the Georgia Baptist Convention geared toward Latinos can be considered successful.⁷⁷

Another indicator of success is the fact that the Latino congregations in the Georgia Baptist Convention have become self-supporting but not detached. Many have organized into fellowships, such as the Hispanic Fellowship of Georgia, which is an association of Latino pastors, ministers, and evangelists. Currently there is a movement in the Latino congregations to organize an association of Latino Baptists in Georgia, as the number of missions, churches, and members seem to point toward continual growth in the future.⁷⁸ Two Latino Baptist leaders, Rev. Rolando Ruíz, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Hispanoamericana in Lilburn, and Rev. Moses Valdés, the Latino missionary to North Georgia, organized the Hispanic Bible Institute of Lilburn to train Latino ministers.⁷⁹ The movement of Latino Baptists in the state toward forming Latino organizations without the stimulation of the Georgia Baptist Convention is indicative of a successful program. Latino missions have evolved from the dependent missions of the 1960s into bold missions and churches that express Latino culture and heritage while maintaining loyalty to the positions and programs of the Georgia Baptist Convention.

The result of the ministries can be detected in the number of Latino missions and churches organized in the state since the 1960s. The Atlanta Baptist Association alone has at least ten Spanish-speaking congregations and two Brazilian churches with members who speak Portuguese.⁸⁰ Missions have been founded in other

⁷⁵Baker interview.

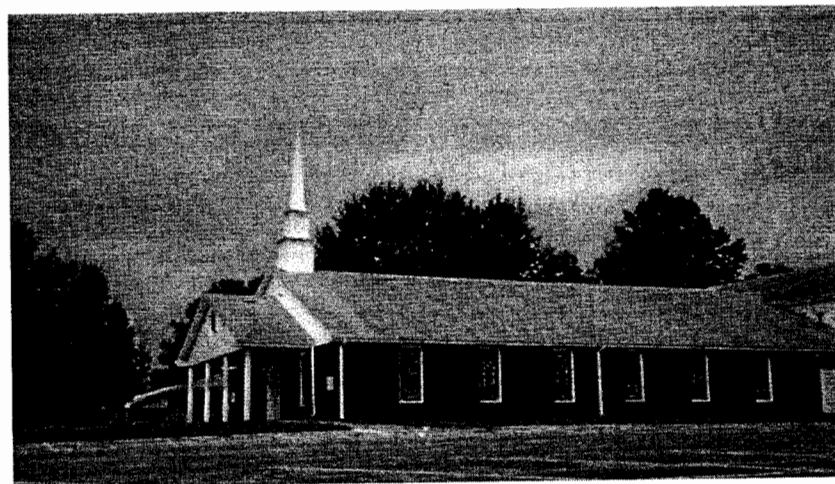
⁷⁶GBC, *Minutes* (1999): 92-215.

⁷⁷Baker interview.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁷⁹Baker, "Ethnics 1985-1995," 38.

⁸⁰"Georgia Baptist Convention Report of Receipts," 15; Baker interview.



Highland Park Baptist Church in Conyers shares its building not only with a Latino congregation but also an African-American congregation. Highland Park Church is a member of the Stone Mountain Baptist Association, which has organized Latino missions and churches in DeKalb and Rockdale counties. Photo by David Moon, Jr.

urban areas such as Augusta and Savannah, semi-urban areas such as Conyers and Gwinnett County, and in rural farming areas such as Valdosta, Moultrie, Vidalia, and Cordele in South Georgia.⁸¹

The future of the Georgia Baptist Convention and Latinos seems promising. The success of the missions is rooted in the methods employed by the convention and the ability of both whites and Latinos to face religious, familial, and social problems. As Reverend Silva often told the Columbus Association of the church's efforts among Latinos: It was "a foreign mission at home."

⁸¹Baker interview.