

FROM AGE^{TO} AGE

A History of the
Delaware Baptist Association
and the Faithfulness of God

Champ Thornton

Foreword by Tom J. Nettles



Delaware Baptist Association, Newark, DE 19713

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Front cover (and page 24): Second Baptist Church (Wilmington, photograph dated 1891), courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

Page 19: Welsh Tract Baptist Church (Iron Hill, photograph dated 1929), courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

Page 28: Delaware Avenue Baptist Church (later Immanuel Baptist Church, Wilmington, photograph dated ca. 1870s), courtesy of the Delaware Historical Society.

Note about these three historic churches: The church pictured on page 19 is the Welsh Tract Baptist Church, the first Baptist church in the state of Delaware (founded 1703). Welsh Tract Baptist helped start First Baptist Church (Wilmington) in 1785. Second Baptist Church (Wilmington), on the front cover and page 24, came from First Baptist in 1835. Three decades later members of Second Baptist planted Delaware Avenue Baptist in 1865 (on page 28). Delaware Avenue Baptist, having changed its name to Immanuel Baptist Church, started Bethany Baptist Church (Newport) in 1951. Bethany Baptist aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention in 1956, becoming the first Southern Baptist Church in the state of Delaware.

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*Dedicated to the thousands of men and women,
members of churches within the Delaware Baptist Association,
who, during the past 50 years, have served the Lord Jesus Christ
with their time, their resources, and their lives*

*And his mercy is from age to age
toward those who fear him.*

—Luke 1:50

Your hand, O God, has guided
your flock *from age to age*;
your faithfulness is written
on history's open page.
Our parents knew your goodness,
and we their deeds record;
and both to this bear witness:
one church, one faith, one Lord!

Your heralds brought the gospel
to greatest and to least;
they summoned men and women
to share the great King's feast.
And this was all their teaching
in every deed and word,
to all alike proclaiming:
one church, one faith, one Lord!

When shadows thick were falling,
and all seemed sunk in night,
You, O Lord, sent your servants,
Your chosen sons of light.
On them and on your people
Your plenteous grace was poured,
and this was still their message:
one church, one faith, one Lord.

Your mercy will not fail us
nor leave your work undone;
with your right hand to help us
the victory shall be won.
And then by earth and heaven
your name shall be adored;
and this shall be our anthem:
one church, one faith, one Lord!

—by Edward Plumptre (1864, revised)

FOREWORD

by Tom J. Nettles

One odd thing about writing history is an awareness of how much can be known, of which previously we have been ignorant, and how much we would like to know that can't be traced out in the records. We look at statements about hopes and sense beneath them certain fears. We see evidences of destitution of purpose and failed expectation and yet find a certain buoyancy of confidence that looks toward a more fruitful future. No matter how small or how large the historical project, these elements consistently weave a pattern of the known and the unknown, the stated and the hidden, the desire and the impassable obstacle.

In Christian history, we add to these the tension that exists between, on the one hand, a clearly perceived sense of call within a clearly stated revelation from God in the propositions of Scripture, and, on the other, the unrevealed mysteries of God's decreed Providence. Some of these things a written historical record can bring to light, and others must remain hidden from view only to be revealed in the last day (Luke 12:2, 3). This history about a local Baptist association covering a relatively short period of time has all of these elements so that the narrative throughout creates a poignant mixture of gratitude, anticipation, disappointment, wonder, and hope. The author, Champ Thornton, has handled both the known and the unknown with clarity, honesty, understanding, love, and clear-headed observation.

Baptist life in Delaware began auspiciously with its first church, the Welsh Tract church, being a part of the justly famed Philadelphia Association. The first successful attempt to organize an association in the state came in 1795; it remained connected confessionally to the Philadelphia Association. That Association established a model of associational life among Baptists that spread throughout the middle colonies and into the South

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through the Charleston Association. They maintained unity of faith, order, and practice among the churches through the adoption of a confession of faith and attendance at highly popular annual (sometimes semi-annual) associational meetings. At these meetings churches would present queries to the Association about matters of doctrine, practice, and mission. They maintained communication with the member churches through a circular letter that encouraged both doctrinal orthodoxy and spiritual fervor. Eventually, they pursued much broader fellowship through their “corresponding letter” written to other associations. They provided preaching for churches destitute of pastoral presence, sent missionaries into areas destitute of churches, and sought to provide education for ministerial candidates destitute of learning. Associational life in their environment was vital for the health of individual churches and for accomplishing a biblical mission that few of them could pursue on their own. The author has pointed out clearly the robust health of this early relationship for Baptists of Delaware.

When the anti-mission-society movement began in the second decade of the nineteenth-century, an ominous change came in Baptist relationships throughout all the associations. The General Missionary Convention, established in 1814 to support the missionary labors of Adoniram and Ann Judson, initially brought new energy and a high degree of national unity among Baptists. By 1821, however, a reaction developed in many associations against this national organization for a variety of reasons. Among the difficulties this remonstrance produced was a failure properly to perceive the biblical relation between divine sovereignty and the biblically ordained efforts by means of which God sustains his purpose of redemption. An unvarnished hyper-Calvinism developed in this reaction and caused decline in both numbers and zeal in those who adopted it. Eventually, as Champ Thornton points out, this opposition came into Delaware through an “old school” pastor in the Welsh Tract church. Correspondingly division came and the association failed. There were starts and stops on two other occasions until the founding of the present association, connected denominationally with Southern Baptists, in 1967.

These events prepare the reader for the way in which broader national and denominational issues affected the vibrancy and corporate witness of the association over the last fifty years. The vision and courage of early days

inspire, and the tenacity and thoughtful responses through the decades express a spirit of settled confidence. The author has given succinct and appreciative notice of the succession of associational ministers and personnel during the fifty years. Of particular interest to me was the work of Mitch Dowell. Mitch's family and my family were friends and fellow church members in Libertyville, Illinois, during the early 1990's. He preached on several occasions in the church. Champ Thornton's description of Mitch's loving spirit, his passion for friendship, and his sincere energy invested in the ministry of the gospel rang true to my own experience with Mitch and his family. He was able to maintain this narrative of appreciation even while describing the dynamics that led to a crisis in the survival of the association. I would conclude that the same kind of accuracy, as well as justified sympathy, characterizes each time Thornton discusses the personnel who invested their lives in the association's witness.

This narrative maintains an excellent balance and sense of understanding in the difficulties endemic to dependence on a budget shared with another denominational entity. Divided time is certainly justified, but accomplishing goals becomes extremely difficult when momentum for one project has to be interrupted periodically to give attention to another. In the economy of space given to this difficulty, Thornton deftly presented a real sense of the frustration, and even sense of futility, that accompanies such a problem. This has never surrendered to hopelessness but has engendered more deeply rooted confidence in the gospel and a more biblically streamlined approach to combined ministry.

Every reader should look carefully to the reflections that close the main section of the historical narrative (pages 119-123). These are made with careful language and adept insight. Each of these points can serve as a lesson to be contemplated for more effective cooperation in the future. Each reader must look at the context of these quotes and give them a serious examination for beneficial insight into a simpler, Bible-centered, effective, *koinonia*-based union. The author has extracted these thick observations from a thoughtful meditation on the history of the Delaware Baptist Association—its personnel, its programs, and its permutations through the decades.

Thornton observed that both churches and associations have “beliefs and practices, but the question of ‘how’ the first leads to the second seems largely missing today.” On the relationship of the association to the larger denominational structure, he noted, “grassroots efforts may be preferable to nationwide movements.” On how local churches respond to superimposed ministry projects, he proposed, “It’s challenging to motivate churches to give financial support and volunteer hours toward ministries which find little resonance within a particular congregation.” Concerning the basic strength of inter-church cooperation, Champ Thornton pointed to “relational rebar.” With sympathy for the urgency of kingdom work, but with wisdom concerning the path by which truth transforms people and cultures, he suggested, “Perhaps a slower pace, with resources focused on fewer and more selective initiatives, would allow more churches to start and to endure.” Through every challenge, every discouragement, every evidence of divine blessing, and in light of the abiding conviction of stewardship of the gospel, Thornton gives prominence to the core conviction of every child transformed by the “blood of the eternal covenant” (Hebrews 13:20): “God has shown himself faithful.”

INTRODUCTION

This book marks and celebrates the 50th anniversary of the Delaware Baptist Association (DBA), which started in 1967. With similarities to many such celebrations, the production of these pages has included for me comparable elements: preparation, surprise, good conversation, reflection, and joy. This half-century milestone presented the opportunity to collect and communicate stories most of which have never been told.

Yet by way of disclaimer, I am not a professional historian, nor is this volume a technical and definitive history. So many details, names, and events have been left out. No history can encompass every fact or figure. The full history of the DBA would recount the stories of thousands of men and women to whom this book is dedicated: faithful followers of Christ, who through the years have loved people, served churches, and advanced the gospel.

Instead, with a view to the faithfulness of God, this work attempts to examine the trends and activities of the Association through the various lenses of its successive directors. In his 2015 biography of theologian J. I. Packer, Leland Ryken identifies three ingredients of biographical writing, which when combined together give a good taste of a person's life. Biographies should include the *events* of the subject's history, the *characteristics* of his person, and the *passions* of his life.¹ And even with these elements in mind, this particular history of the DBA and its leaders paints with broad strokes, providing sketch work and mere highlights of people, facts, and trends. In this way, I trust that the account is accurate in what it includes, and not negligent in what it omits.

At center stage in this history is no one other than God himself. With unfailing reliability he has guided and guarded, enabling ministries and ending them. He is always faithful—before 1967, during the last fifty years, at the present, into the future, and even eventually after the DBA, for no human organization lasts forever. Yet throughout history God has been pleased to use the flaws and strengths of his people. Ministries and individuals come and go, and through it all he remains, and will remain, the faithful God.

In the production of this book, I've had the privilege of meeting men and women and hearing their own first-hand histories. I'd like to express my appreciation for many who shared their time and reflections in personal interviews: Mrs. Jennie Adams, Rev. Jon Boulet, Rev. Mitch Dowell, Dr. Frank Frischkorn, Mr. Harry Ganoe, Dr. Blake Hardcastle, Dr. Curtis Hill, Rev. Paul Hollenbach, Ms. Kathie Johnson, Dr. Willie Johnson, Mrs. Clarice Johnson, Mr. Ralph Jones, Mrs. Dorothy Jones, Rev. Jim McBride, Mrs. Valerie Pryor, Mr. Daniel Tollison, Rev. Mal Utley, and Mrs. Marjorie White. I'm also grateful to Rev. Jon Boulet, Rev. Buzzy Cook, Dr. Blake Hardcastle, Dr. Curtis Hill, Ms. Kathie Johnson, Rev. Jim McBride, Dr. David Moore, and Mrs. Valerie Pryor for their willingness to read part or all of an early draft and provide valuable feedback.

Special thanks are also due to BCM/D Executive Director, Dr. Kevin Smith, for his gracious endorsement, to my good friend Shannon Brown for his brilliant work in designing the book's cover and typesetting its pages, to John Mason for his insightful editorial feedback, and to Valerie Pryor—and to all who preceded her as administrative assistants at the DBA—who kept such meticulous records, without which the Association's history would've been impossible to assemble.

Finally, I want to thank Dr. Tom Nettles, who is Senior Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, for graciously taking the time and lending his expertise to pen such a substantive *Foreword* to this brief history. I've never met Dr. Nettles, though I've been familiar with his work in Baptist history for a number of years. In addition to his magisterial, three-volume history of Baptists, Dr. Nettles's major biographies of Charles Spurgeon and James Petigru Boyce (founder of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) bring the lessons and personalities of the past into the present with academic accuracy and devotional warmth. In his *Foreword* to this book, readers will discover similar treasures: the breadth of his historical analysis and the depth of his pastoral insight. I'm honored to include his *Foreword* in this history.

I have loved this project—the conversations, the research, the writing—from start to finish. Along the way, I have been reminded of how the Lord works: often in ways we do not expect. The paths down which he leads may match neither what we had envisioned nor desired. Yet with every step, he will

keep both his promises and his people. As you read, I hope you too will see and be encouraged that our God remains faithful through every age.

Champ Thornton
Newark, Delaware
August 15, 2017

*Your hand, O God, has guided
your flock from age to age;
your faithfulness is written
on history's open page.*

PART ONE

TRACING ROOTS

*Our parents knew your goodness,
and we their deeds record;
and both to this bear witness:
one church, one faith, one Lord!*

The sanctuary at First Southern Baptist Church was empty most weekday afternoons. But this was no ordinary Tuesday.

As the clock struck 2 p.m. on October 10, 1967, the sound of singing rang throughout the room. Just over 100 men and women, messengers representing six Delaware churches and two mission chapels, had gathered in Dover to witness a happy event for which they had long planned and prayed.

Since the early 1950s Southern Baptist Churches in the state of Delaware had belonged, at the local level, to an association headquartered in Maryland—either the Eastern or the Susquehanna Association. But with 28 churches just in the Maryland portion of the Eastern Association and 29 Maryland churches in the Susquehanna—and with the combined area of the Associations spanning over 1,400 square miles in Maryland alone—many Baptists in Delaware felt the need for an association that more closely shared both local geography and local concerns.

So for all who attended, this was an historic moment for Delaware. After singing, *To God by the Glory*, listening to a reading of Matthew 9:35-38, praying together, and reading letters of official commendation from the Eastern and Susquehanna Associations, the time had finally come. The motion was made: that “all messengers elected by said churches constitute the first annual session of the Delaware Baptist Association And we further move that the said churches join together in the official constitution of the Delaware Baptist Association.”

This motion, to form the Delaware Baptist Association, was seconded and approved without a dissenting vote. The DBA had begun . . . for a third time.

CHAPTER ONE

THE EARLY DELAWARE BAPTIST ASSOCIATIONS

Almost exactly 172 years before the DBA began in 1967, twelve delegates from six Baptist churches left their homes and began traveling to another historic meeting. From all three counties in Delaware and one in Maryland they came. Until on October 24, 1795, these representatives gathered together to constitute the Delaware Baptist Association.



Welsh Tract Baptist Church, exterior view of graveyard and church, 1929

The earliest of these churches, the Welsh Tract Baptist Church, had been started in 1703 by men and women who had recently emigrated from Wales and purchased a tract of land in New Castle County, near Iron Hill. For the next 75 years, most of the handful of Baptist churches in New Castle and Kent

Counties could trace their lineage to this church.² So by 1795 God had raised up at least five Baptist churches in Delaware who also belonged to the Philadelphia Baptist Association: the Welsh Tract Baptist Church (1703), the Cow Marsh Baptist Church (1781), the Duck Creek (later Bryn Zion) Baptist Church (1781), Mispillion Baptist Church (1783), and First Baptist Church of Wilmington (1785). These five churches, along with Queen Anne's Baptist Church, which likely belonged to an association in Maryland, united to form the very first Delaware Baptist Association.³

“The numbers and influence of the denomination in this State for many years was small, yet it was for a long time equal, in proportion to the population, to any of the Middle States.” —David Benedict, *A General History of the Baptist Denomination in America* (1848)⁴

The design for this new association in Delaware was rooted in Scripture⁵ and already modeled by the association in Philadelphia. Having begun in 1707, the Philadelphia Baptist Association was the first Baptist association in America. They “gathered yearly around the preaching and teaching of scriptural and theological issues, to maintain orderly churches, but also to consider the unique needs of member churches. To this end, the Philadelphia Association minutes display the Association’s involvement in essential church matters. Observing the minutes reveals two aspects of this involvement: (1) accountability toward doctrinal purity and church order, and (2) protection of unity among local congregations.”⁶

By the end of the 1700s, the focus of the Philadelphia Association had begun to widen. As the 1800s unfolded, “the Philadelphia Baptist Association mirrored Baptist churches, in general, by shifting its focus toward missionary and educational needs at the expense of . . . the once common interchange between the Association and its member churches regarding internal church matters.”⁷ As cooperation for missions became more central to Baptist associations, mutual theological sharpening and accountability among churches and their leaders may have waned, but church planting and evangelism flourished.

In the Lord’s kindness, the first 40 years of the fledgling Association in Delaware were marked by the same kind of growth and health. In 1801, the six churches within this Delaware Association saw a combined membership of 293 members, but by 1825 the number of churches had grown to nine and their membership to 596.⁸ Describing Baptist churches in Delaware during this time period, pastor and historian, Richard Briscoe Cook, said, “the Baptists of Delaware were a missionary, and consequently a growing, people, and Delaware was a center of Baptist power and influence. . . . And for a quarter of a century after the formation of the Delaware Association these were missionary churches, favoring [mission] societies for extending the Redeemer’s kingdom at home and in foreign lands.”⁹

Supporting and energizing this missionary zeal was a strong doctrinal conviction. For like the majority of Baptist congregations in America,¹⁰ all DBA churches held to the Philadelphia Confession of Faith (1742),¹¹ which rooted its evangelism deep in doctrine. It affirmed that without both the working of the Holy Spirit and the giving of the gospel, no one could turn to Christ for salvation.

“Although the gospel be the only outward means of revealing Christ and saving grace, and is, as such, abundantly sufficient thereunto; yet that men who are dead in trespasses may be born again, quickened or regenerated, there is moreover necessary an effectual insuperable work of the Holy Spirit upon the whole soul, for the producing in them a new spiritual life; without which no other means will effect their conversion unto God.” —*The Philadelphia Confession of Faith*, section 20.4

Delaware Baptists, through the 1700s and into the 1800s, were vigorous to connect their theology and practice. And God was faithful, enabling this combination to bear much fruit. A letter from this era, written in 1816 by pastor of First Baptist in Wilmington, John M. Peck, and also officially approved by the Delaware Baptist Association, reflects a radiantly evangelistic spirit and thankful heart for all that God had done across the state.

“If we take a cursory view of what has been effected in the last twenty-five years, who can withhold the exclamation, ‘What hath God wrought!’ At that period the missionary flame commenced in Europe: it hath kindled across continents and islands, until the same holy fervor, in a good degree, warms the hearts of God’s children on every side of the globe. No difficulties are insuperable to the zeal which animates the heralds of salvation: they go forth in every direction, bearing the precious treasure of eternal life. . . . The real Christian, while viewing, on the one hand, the darkness, misery, and guilt of a large portion of the human family who are famishing for the ‘bread of eternal life,’ and on the other the ardent zeal discovered to relieve their miserable state, pants for the privilege of entering into the harvest. . . . Had we lived half a century ago, we might have been suffered to sleep securely, insensible to the wants of our perishing fellow-men. . . . Let us cast our eyes on

the multitudes around us in this land of gospel light, . . . [who are] without the means of religious instruction. . . . Let us be aroused by these considerations to make one united and vigorous effort to spread the gospel of Jesus both at home and abroad.”¹²

Yet less than four decades after the DBA had begun, a turn of events threatened to extinguish this missionary zeal across the state.

New Pastor, Old School

In 1831, the Welsh Tract Baptist Church called a new pastor, the 12th in their history to that point. His name was Samuel Trott.¹³ Within the first two years of his ministry, he had written letters to the Delaware Baptist Association both decrying so-called “modern methodologies” in churches such as ministerial salaries, theological education, and missionary societies, and also labeling all evangelistic efforts as merely “resorting to the plans of human contrivance.”¹⁴ He offered this explanation for such inactivity: “Hence we prefer praying to him, the Lord of the harvest, to send forth laborers into his harvest such as he shall choose and qualify, and [we] rely on his wisdom, power, and faithfulness to provide all things necessary for gathering in his elect and extending the knowledge of his salvation to the ends of the earth . . .”¹⁵

Churches of this hyper-Calvinistic and anti-missionary perspective are commonly called Primitive, Hard Shell, or Old School Baptists. And Baptist churches in Delaware, as throughout the United States, during the early decades of the 1800s, became divided over the issue of missions.

“The anti-mission forces in the churches were opposed to centralization of authority, to an educated and paid ministry, and to such man-made organizations as Sunday schools, missionary societies, and theological seminaries. The hyper-Calvinism, which so often characterized the theological frame of mind of this group, was frequently used to bolster and justify their other arguments against exerting any effort to evangelize the lost.” —Robert Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the churches within the Delaware Baptist Association quickly dwindled. And a divide began to open between the churches in favor of missions and those opposed to it. With the result that in the year 1835, 40 years after the founding of the DBA, the Second Baptist Church of Wilmington began, a missionary-minded split from First Baptist. Back in 1817, First Baptist of Wilmington had recorded 208 members, but after embracing the anti-missionary theology, their roll had shrunk to less than a dozen by 1879.¹⁷

One eyewitness to these events—Pastor Morgan J. Rhees—described the downgrade caused by the anti-missionary churches in Delaware: “They withhold from the Lord’s cause that which he demands, and the result is the heavens withhold their blessings. God has called for a drought upon them in spiritual things, and they are withering and fast decaying; and it needs no prophetic gift to see their speedy dissolution unless they repent and return to the Lord and engage in his service.”¹⁸

God’s people must actively rely, but never passively presume, upon God’s faithfulness. Heeding the warning from the decline of these years, the words of historian Richard Briscoe Cook ring as true in the present as they did over a century ago:

“The lesson for us today is the necessity of the Missionary spirit to the extension, existence, and perpetuity of the churches of Christ. . . . It behooves every Baptist in Delaware to become identified with the work of the denomination in the State, to correspond with the nearest Baptist Pastor, to start a prayer-meeting, or a Sunday-school, or a church in his own dwelling, and call the brethren to help in the work; The Baptists have their part to do in the evangelization of the State; there are sinners to be saved. The prayer is needed, here as elsewhere, for more laborers. Faithfulness, and consequent growth, on the part of Baptists would only tend to strengthen the cause of true religion in general, and to make every Christian better and every church stronger.”¹⁹

With the start of Second Baptist, Wilmington, in 1835, in protest against the Old School movement, the old DBA began to free fall, losing missionary-minded churches across the state. By the end of that year, only 1 church with 13 members remained within the Delaware Baptist Association,²⁰

which by 1856 would officially change its name to become the “Delaware Old School Baptist Association.”²¹



Second Baptist Church, Wilmington, DE (photo taken in 1891)

Yet, if for some this doctrinal controversy exposed their negligence of evangelism, for others it shook their confidence in the possibility of maintaining robust theological alliance with other churches. Instead, doctrine was only to be affirmed as the basis for cooperative mission, not, as it had been in the past, collectively discussed and applied as vital to church health. For example, in the era following the controversy, one pastor penned a circular letter distributed to churches, which, first, expressed “a deep concern for church health and doctrine. . . . Secondly, he observed that the exercise of discipline waned among member churches. [And thirdly], he observed theological erosion within local churches.”²² In associational life at this time, the importance of theology for church health faded even as cooperative efforts for evangelism and education grew.

A More Perfect Union

Yet in all this, as he had promised, the Lord continued to build his church. After the decisive split of 1835, some Baptist churches, though unsurprisingly few in number,²³ nonetheless grew and even thrived. Within 40 years, there were ten missionary-minded churches with a combined membership

of 886 people. And by 1878, quite a number of biblically faithful Baptist churches and institutions dotted the landscape of Delaware:

- Second Baptist, Wilmington (1835)
- Dover Baptist (1852)
- First German Baptist (1856)
- Delaware Avenue Baptist, Wilmington (1865)
- Plymouth Baptist (1867-1873)
- Lincoln Baptist (1869-1873)
- Wyoming Institute (1869)
- Wilmington City Baptist Mission (1870)
- Zion Baptist (1871)
- Wyoming Baptist (1872)
- Magnolia Baptist (1873)
- Milford Baptist (1873)
- Elm Street Baptist, Wilmington (1873-1876)
- Shiloh Baptist, Wilmington (1876)
- First Baptist, New Castle (1876)
- Bethany Baptist, Wilmington (1878)

Then in 1879 the Lord began to give Baptist churches in Delaware the blessing of significant growth. Correspondingly, the collective emphasis of these churches during the mid- to late-1800s focused primarily on evangelism and church planting.²⁴ So through the Lord's grace, by 1890 missionary-minded Baptist churches in Delaware saw a total membership of 1,924 men and women, an average of 175 people per church.²⁵ This was a substantial upsurge compared even to the churches, which in 1830, before the "Old School" controversy, had reported a combined membership of 546 members, an average of only about 61 per church.²⁶ This late-nineteenth-Century influx is due in part to the blessing of God poured out through the ministry of evangelist Dwight L. Moody. In 1873 following a Moody revival, Baptist churches in the states of Delaware and Pennsylvania saw over 6,000 baptisms in one year—at that time the most in a single year.²⁷

Throughout this time (roughly 1835-1880), most of these Baptist churches belonged to the historic Philadelphia Baptist Association.²⁸ But by the late

1860s, many of the pro-missions churches in Delaware wanted, once again, to consolidate their efforts into their own statewide association.²⁹

So, at Dover Baptist Church on November 3, 1870, six men—half of them pastors, half laymen—drafted the Constitution and By-Laws for a new Delaware Baptist Association. If successful, this would be the second DBA. Yet “they failed to get their Association, for ‘love for the old Philadelphia [Association] was too strong.’”³⁰ The first DBA had dwindled into obscurity because of disloyalty to biblical commands, but this attempt never got off the ground due to loyalty to denominational ties.

For denominational concerns had been growing increasingly important to Baptist churches in the United States.³¹ With the formation of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, Southern Baptist churches could pursue cooperative missionary and educational endeavors through a burgeoning denominational structure. Unsurprisingly then, the same churches who had unsuccessfully attempted to start another DBA, once more united in 1874 to start the Delaware Baptist Missionary Union, whose purpose was “to cultivate the destitute field, and to encourage the feeble churches within its bounds.”³² Although discussion and dreams about starting another Delaware Baptist Association recurred occasionally over the next few decades, this proposal continued to encounter opposition.³³

Even in the absence of an official “Association,” the Delaware Baptist Missionary Union, which within four years had been renamed the Delaware Baptist Union (DBU), became a vibrant and diverse statewide vehicle for collaboration among mission-minded Baptist churches for the next twenty years.³⁴

Return of the Association

So from the early 1880s into the mid-1890s, all Baptist churches in the state of Delaware, except for Primitive (Old School) Baptists, belonged to the Delaware Baptist Union and to the Philadelphia Baptist Association, affirming the Philadelphia Confession of Faith.³⁵ But in 1893, after multiple attempts to start an association distinct from the Philadelphia Association, the delegates of the Delaware Baptist Union voted to finally form an association: the Delaware Baptist Union Association (DBUA). This was the second Baptist “Association” in the state of Delaware.

THE DELAWARE BAPTISTS.

**Meeting of Delaware Baptist Union
—Its Origin and Progress.**

The semi-annual meeting of the Delaware Baptist Union which takes place at Camden, Del., on the 9th and 10th of this month, will doubtless be of interest to a great number in this city, as a promising programme is presented and the committee having the exercises in charge have spared no pains to make the session one of interest and profit.

The Delaware Baptist Missionary Union of which the Delaware Baptist Union is an enlargement, originated in the year 1874, through the efforts of Rev. Mr. Falwell of the Delaware Avenue Baptist Church, and several other prominent Baptist ministers throughout the State. The society has been quite successful and at present, has two missionaries in the State. Rev. J. D. Craig being missionary among the whites and Rev. H. C. Jones among the colored people.

The Delaware Baptist Union was organized in the year 1878 in the Second Baptist Church of this city by a committee of which the Rev. R. B. Cook of the Second Baptist Church was chairman, and the Rev. H. G. Weston, D. D., president of the Crozier Theological Seminary, Chester, Pa., was prominently connected, and others from the different churches of this city and State, perfected the organization which embraces the State of Delaware and Delaware county, Pa. Delegates from all the churches in the State and of Delaware county will be in attendance.

From *The News Journal* (Wilmington, DE) May 2, 1882

GATHERING OF BAPTISTS.

Concluding Exercises of the Convention at Delaware Avenue Church.

The afternoon session of the Delaware Baptist Union Association, yesterday, was in the interest of missions. Mrs. W. A. Walling presided and Mrs. M. H. Beckwith conducted devotional exercises.

Miss M. J. Rochelle made an address on training schools. Home and foreign missions were represented, respectively, by Miss Sill and Mrs. Kirkpatrick. The Rev. Francis G. Merrill delivered an address on "Our Missionary Needs and Resources," in which he gave the following statistics: There are in Delaware 29 villages of over 300 population; five towns of over 3,000; four of over 2,000; one of 4,000 and one of 5,000 population in which there are no Baptist churches. In the State there are but 10 Baptist churches and a membership of 1,662.

The Rev. A. J. Rowland, D. D., spoke in behalf of the American Baptist Publication Society and the moderator urged Baptists to patronize Bucknell University.

The Rev. R. M. Middleditch presented the report of the committee on digest of letters from the churches. The report announced both temporal and spiritual depression and stated that there had been about 200 baptisms during the year and a decrease of 126 in membership.

It was resolved to raise \$200 for the church at New Castle, \$100 to be contributed by the Delaware Baptist Union Association and the balance by the Philadelphia association. During the afternoon and evening the sum of \$175 was raised.

Late in the afternoon the Federation of Baptist Young People met and elected the following officers: The Rev. A. P. Mihm, president; the Rev. O. G. Buddington, first vice-president; H. W. Benson, second vice-president; Miss Clara Dill, secretary; W. S. Catlett, treasurer; Dr. W. F. Lehmen, David Winfield and Lawrence Green, managers.

The evening meeting was under the auspices of the Federation of Baptist Young People. Interesting addresses were delivered by the Rev. S. B. Meeser, the Rev. O. G. Buddington and Garrett Pendleton and excellent music was furnished by the choir of Delaware Avenue Baptist Church.

The association adjourned to meet at Ridley Park next October.

From *The News Journal* (Wilmington, DE) October 10, 1895

BAPTISTS WITHDRAW.

**Delegates From Delaware Will Form
an Independent Association.**

CHESTER, May 8.—After a discussion in open meetings and in church papers for over two years, the pastors and delegates from the Baptist churches in Delaware county, Pa., and the State of Delaware, decided, at the meeting to-day to withdraw from the Philadelphia Association and form the Delaware Baptist Union Association.

The reason for the action is that the Philadelphia Association is too large a body for the expeditious transaction of business.

From *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Philadelphia, PA) May 9, 1894

DELAWARE BAPTIST UNION.

The Semi-annual Meeting Held in Chester Yesterday.

The Delaware Baptist Union assembled in semi annual session in the First Baptist Church, at Chester, yesterday. A report was made by Harry Emmons, of this city, on new organization, and it was adopted. The name was changed to the Delaware Baptist Union Association. Hereafter the annual meeting will be held the second Tuesday in October.

A committee was appointed to petition the Legislature to change the name of the union. Rev. O. G. Buddington presented the semi-annual report of the Committee on Missionary Work. Rev. W. A. Walling made an address at the evening session on "Young People's Work."

From *The Evening Journal* (Wilmington, DE) May 9, 1894

At that time the DBUA was comprised of 19 churches, with 3,514 members.³⁶ As the years passed, the Delaware Baptist Union Association eventually aligned with the Northern Baptist Convention (founded 1907), which has split or been renamed several times in the 20th Century. By 1973, the Delaware Baptist Union Association had shortened its name to the Delaware Baptist Association and affiliated with the American Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania and Delaware (ABCOPAD). In 2017, this Delaware Baptist Association had 13 churches, which, due to the cultural and geographic differences found in the state, maintained limited cooperation with each other. And with no associational website or personnel, the primary expression of this DBA was seen in the gathering of its pastors for continuing education and fellowship.³⁷

Yet it is from the flowering branch of the former Delaware Baptist (Union) Association that the seeds of the third Delaware Baptist Association fell. Thirty years after Second Baptist Church (Wilmington) had been founded, members from that congregation started the Delaware Avenue Baptist Church (1865), which in 1946 changed its name to Immanuel Baptist Church (Wilmington).³⁸ Five years later, Immanuel planted what would become the first Southern Baptist Church in the state of Delaware: Bethany Baptist Church in Newport.³⁹



Delaware Avenue Baptist Church, Wilmington, DE (photo taken in the 1870s)

Seven years later Bethany helped start another SBC church, Ogletown Baptist in Newark (1958). And in that same era, other Southern Baptist churches sprang up, including First Southern Baptist in Dover (later renamed Cornerstone, 1958), Grace Baptist in Seaford (1959), and Harrington Baptist (1961).

God continued to establish and sustain biblically faithful congregations all across Delaware. The energy of these new churches, along with other SBC congregations added over the next decade, continued to gain momentum, until in October 1967, over 100 men and women gathered in Dover to start the third Delaware Baptist Association.

PART TWO

LAYING FOUNDATIONS (1967-1989)

*Your heralds brought the gospel
to greatest and to least;
they summoned men and women
to share the great King's feast.*

By the time the DBA started in 1967, both Baptist churches and the United States had undergone massive alterations since the time when the Delaware Baptist Union Association was formed in 1894. Due to the Great Depression in the 1930s, many families who had lived in the South for generations were compelled to find work and new homes in states which lay far to the west and north of their roots. Additionally, the military buildup from World War II and the postwar industrial expansion relocated men and women away from their home states to military bases and growing cities all across the United States.

Nationwide Expansion

So as Baptists moved out of the South, they looked for churches they could call home. Some found their place in Northern (later American) Baptist Churches, while others found them lacking. Allen writes, “A Southern

Baptist military family transferred to a northeastern base might have a lukewarm reaction to Northern Baptists' membership in ecumenical bodies, or independent Baptists' fascination with dispensationalism, but a lack of southern-style table fellowship or Sunday night Bible training for their children, and less than vibrant Sunday School programs were unacceptable conditions.”⁴⁰

“As a border state, Delaware has been on the dividing line between the worship and preaching style of the Southern Baptists and the more reserved northern branches such as the American Baptist Church.” —Sharon Cannon, *State News*, 1980⁴¹

Beginning in the 1940s, the Southern Baptist Convention moved to meet this need. In 1942, the SBC began to move across geographic boundaries, which, since the late 1800s and early 1900s, had partitioned the country into Southern Baptist and Northern Baptist regions.⁴² The cause of missions was becoming more important than territorial loyalties. Then in 1955, the strategy of the Home Mission Board (later the North American Mission Board)—to “start new work wherever possible by working through the nearest state convention”—became the official policy and practice of the denomination.⁴³ Within the first year, the SBC had started works within 10 new states, and the Baptist Convention of Maryland (BCM) had taken their first step into what would become the “Northeast Expansion.”

Northeastern Growth

In 1956, the BCM had recognized their first non-Maryland church: Bethany Baptist Church (Newport, Delaware), which had been started five years before by Immanuel Baptist in Wilmington. And this outward expansion continued. In what would be remembered as an historic move, the very next year, another BCM church (College Avenue Baptist in Annapolis, Maryland) began sponsoring the mission chapel in New York, which soon became the Manhattan Baptist Church.⁴⁴ Over the next ten years, the Baptist Convention of Maryland “became the main outlet for taking the

Southern Baptist program into the northeast,” expanding from one state to eleven, and from seven associations to twenty.⁴⁵

During this decade, not only did the range and extent of SBC churches in America experience significant changes, but so also did their associations. Since the 1930s, associations which were connected to the SBC primarily existed “to represent the denomination’s programs to the churches.”⁴⁶ But at a pivotal meeting in 1963, the SBC associations received a new purpose that better fit with the widening horizons of the denomination: missions. Consequently, the role of associational leaders also shifted toward outreach: “Our objective as missionaries would be to meet the needs of churches rather than the mere promotion of programs.”⁴⁷ The clarity of these statements generated gratefulness to God and relief for many pastors and associational leaders, who had for years wrestled with the nature of their purpose. Associations across the country had long grappled to identify the unique contribution of their particular role as distinguished from those of the state and national conventions.⁴⁸ Yet in the state of Delaware, a struggle persisted.

CHAPTER TWO

FOUNDING YEARS (1967-1969)

In the spring of 1967, William Halliburton received a letter he had not expected. He was only three years into his new role as pastor of Harrington Baptist Church, and the letter was from fellow pastor, Richard Caughron, who himself had only been at Bethany Baptist for five years. Postmarked from Newport, Delaware, 63 miles away, this envelope contained an idea which, in God's providence, would soon cover the entire state.

As William Halliburton scanned the letter, he couldn't believe what he was reading. It had only been the week before, in a conversation with Pastor R. T. Tidwell, from nearby Milford Baptist Chapel (later Lynch Heights Baptist Church), that the identical possibility had been discussed and considered. Pastor Halliburton later recalled, "It was an idea that sprang up in the hearts of different individuals, some who had not even known the other parties, over a period of time, and this idea finally had its 'hour' come in the spring and summer of 1967."⁴⁹ Two separate pastors, on two distinct occasions—with a single concept: the possibility of starting a Baptist association in Delaware.⁵⁰

"Delaware is a small state whose total population is approximately one-fourth that of Metropolitan Baltimore. There are no major cities, yet the 'first state' has many opportunities for Southern Baptist witness and work."
—from *The Maryland Baptist*, April 23, 1970

Yet for this idea to become reality, various challenges had to be addressed and overcome. The struggles to birth the DBA were numerous. To the founding pastors of the DBA, the first concern was practical. Churches above the Delaware Canal were more urban in outlook and personality, while churches below the Canal were more rural and "independent-minded."⁵¹