

INTO THE DARKNESS



75 Years of Free Will Baptist
International Missions



FREE WILL BAPTIST
INTERNATIONAL
MISSIONS

WELCOME

Into *The Darkness* is an appropriate title for this volume. For 75 years, Free Will Baptists from rural areas, small towns, and the great cities of the United States departed the land of their birth and voluntarily headed *Into The Darkness* to share His Light and Truth. From coast-to-coast, an unrelenting flow of men and women responded to the call to go.

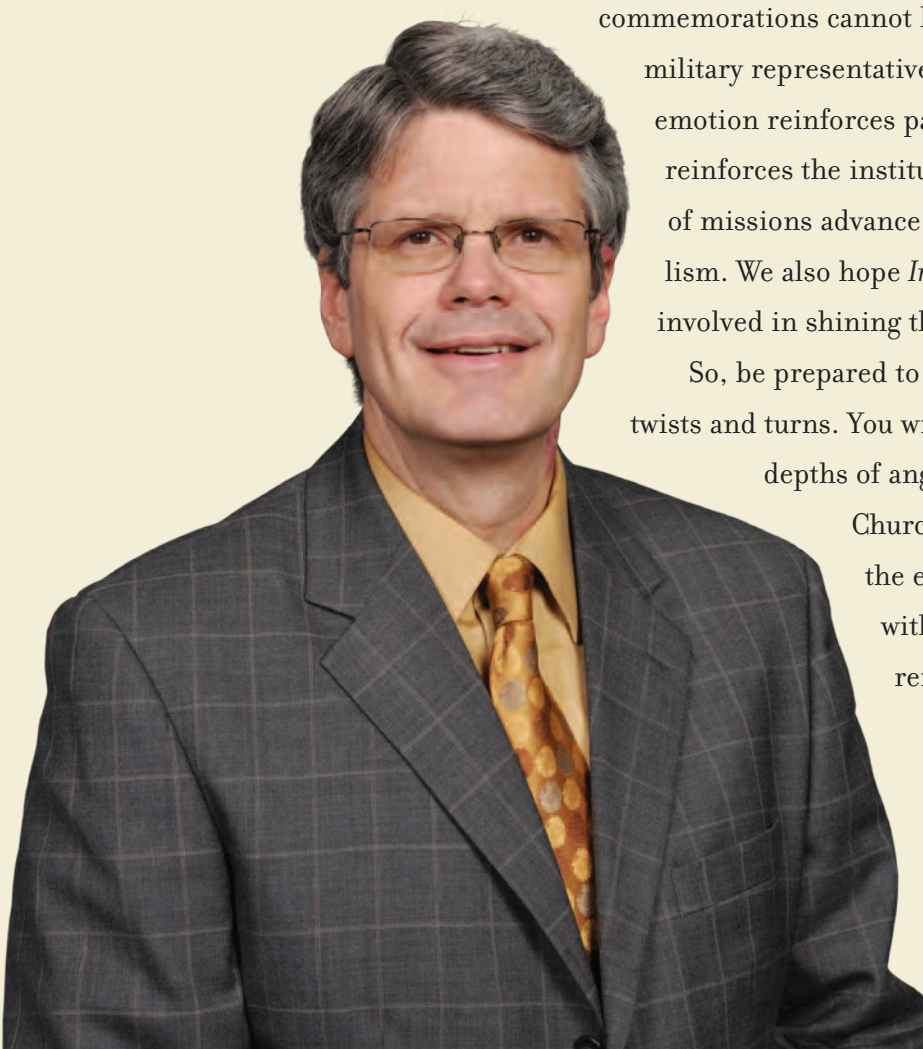
Obedience to God's call led them to tribal peoples in Africa and India. They faced spiritual darkness in the world-class cities of Europe, Asia, and Latin America. With abandon they labored in the midst of civil wars, military invasions, natural disasters, and abject poverty. These intrepid men and women battled discouragement, opposition, and the forces of evil in the attempt to bring worshippers to the throne of God.

In the midst of the darkness *He* has been their Light and Truth. What He promised, He has fulfilled, “. . . and lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Matthew 28:20). *Into The Darkness*, therefore, is a book of celebration. We celebrate the faithfulness of God, and of His servants who answered His call. Celebration is important for any group of people. It can be a powerful instrument to reinforce values and beliefs. Celebration even serves as a vehicle to transfer values and beliefs to future generations.

Lloyd Kwast's model of understanding cultures states that our behavior is based on our values, and our values are based on what we believe. Ultimately, what we believe is based on our worldview. In transference of culture from generation to generation, the younger generation realizes what is considered important, worthy, and of value. A faithful reading of Scripture will always lead us to the conclusion that sharing the gospel with those who haven't heard is of ultimate and eternal value to God. We trust *Into The Darkness* will reinforce that truth.

In addition to celebration, the 75th anniversary of Laura Belle Barnard boarding the S.S. *Potter* in New York City provides us a perfect opportunity for commemoration. In any cultural group, whether a hidden tribal people, a college booster club, a branch of military service, or in our case, a denomination, the importance of rituals and commemorations cannot be overstated. We choke back tears when a United States military representative presents the flag to the widow of a fallen soldier. That emotion reinforces patriotism. A 50th anniversary celebration for a couple reinforces the institution of marriage. Likewise, this celebration of 75 years of missions advance reinforces the ultimate importance of global evangelism. We also hope *Into The Darkness* will deepen your appreciation for those involved in shining the Light.

So, be prepared to be surprised. The road *Into The Darkness* has many twists and turns. You will experience the heights of joy and victory as well as the depths of anguish and defeat. In the midst of it all He is building His Church and the gates of hell are not prevailing against it. In the end we hope that this chronicle of the journey will fill you with joy, encouragement, and a passion to reach those who remain in darkness.

James F. Forlines
James F. Forlines, General Director

INTRODUCTION

Ralph Winter, a missionary statesman of our generation, wrote, “[God] has given us a clear and simple task to finish: to see that Christ is worshipped and followed in every people. This is the essential missionary task. This we must do with utmost focus and passion until it is finished” (*Finishing the Task*, Mission Frontiers, June 2000).

Free Will Baptists have manifested their obedience to this task for the past 75 years through Free Will Baptist Foreign, and now, International Missions. The journey *Into The Darkness* began with Laura Belle Barnard on July 5, 1935. According to ship records that was the day she left New York City aboard the *S.S. Potter* bound for Bombay, India. Or, more accurately, we might say that the journey began again with her. One hundred years earlier, in 1835, Jeremiah Phillips and Eli Noyes departed as Free Will Baptist missionaries to a different part of India (now known as the state of Orissa).

From 1835 until 1911 Free Will Baptists had a foreign missions presence. A merger with Northern Baptists in

1910-11 left the scattered and unaffiliated Free Will Baptists without a foreign mission organization, and in many ways, without a missionary vision and zeal. Twenty-five years went by without any organized Free Will Baptist foreign missions efforts. God then sent a single, young woman in her mid-20s to awaken the denomination to this “clear and simple task.”

Former president of Free Will Baptist Bible College, Dr. L. C. Johnson said it this way,

“An entire denomination was without a missionary conscience. For a quarter of a century no one had emerged to give an awareness of this responsibility to ‘the other lost sheep.’ The

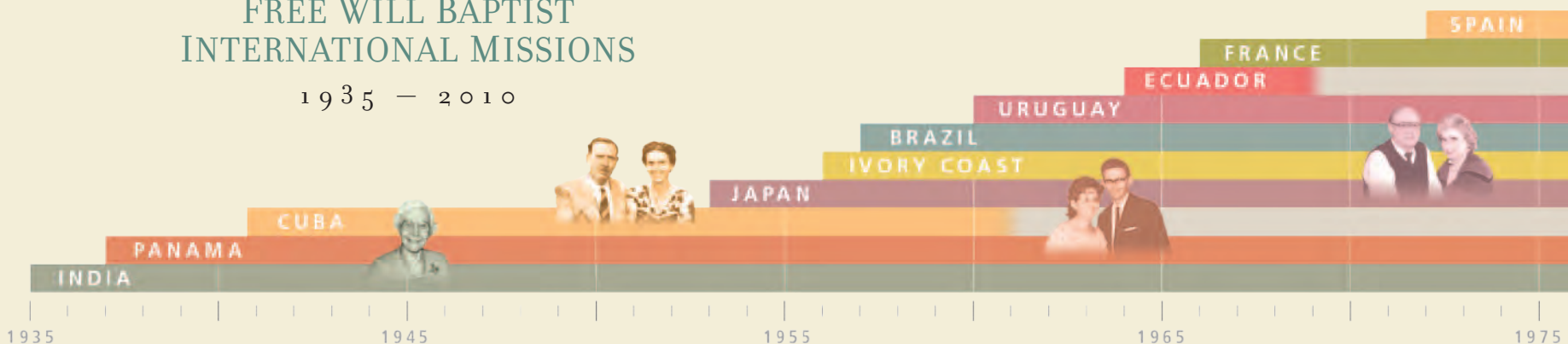
workings of God in Miss Laura Belle’s life, to prick the conscience of an entire denomination, becomes evident even though unusual” (*Touching The Untouchables*, p. 9).

The journey since the *S.S. Potter*’s voyage has been an incredible story of Kingdom advance. More than 300 Free Will Baptist men and women have followed in Laura Belle’s footsteps—leaving their home in the States to take the Light to unreached peoples on five continents around the world. Beginning in the Niligiri Hills of Tamil Nadu in South India, the Light has dispersed and now shines in over 20 countries. In 1935, Free Will Baptists had no churches outside of North America. In 2010, people in over 1,100 overseas churches and mission works worship the Lord Jesus Christ. Nearly 600 national pastors join our current missionary force of 100 in fulfilling our stewardship responsibility of reaching the unreached. Twelve Bible institutes and seminaries around the world are training an additional 400 workers for the harvest fields. This is the story we tell in *Into The Darkness*.

The purpose adopted and pursued by our early pioneer missionaries is still our purpose today. FWBIM has always reached out to unreached peoples with the ultimate goal of planting churches and initiating church planting

FREE WILL BAPTIST INTERNATIONAL MISSIONS

1935 — 2010



movements. In June of 1935, Laura Belle met with the Eastern General Conference in Greenville, North Carolina. She had a clear understanding of their expectations. “I was to make it a definite aim to search out a *needy field* in India where Free Will Baptists would be invited to send further missionaries, develop a work, and *establish churches*” [Laura Belle Barnard, *Touching The Untouchables*, p. 49—emphasis supplied].

The call of reaching unreached peoples (needy fields) has been a defining characteristic of the Mission. It has determined the areas of the world to which we feel called. If another evangelical group is working in an area, FWBIM has chosen to go where no evangelical effort exists. Our goal is not to simply advance the Free Will Baptist denomination, our goal is to advance the Kingdom.

We adhere to the confession of the Apostle Paul in Romans 15:20 when he said, “And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man’s foundation” (NKJV). This is the origin then, of our current purpose statement: We exist to facilitate church planting movements among unreached peoples.

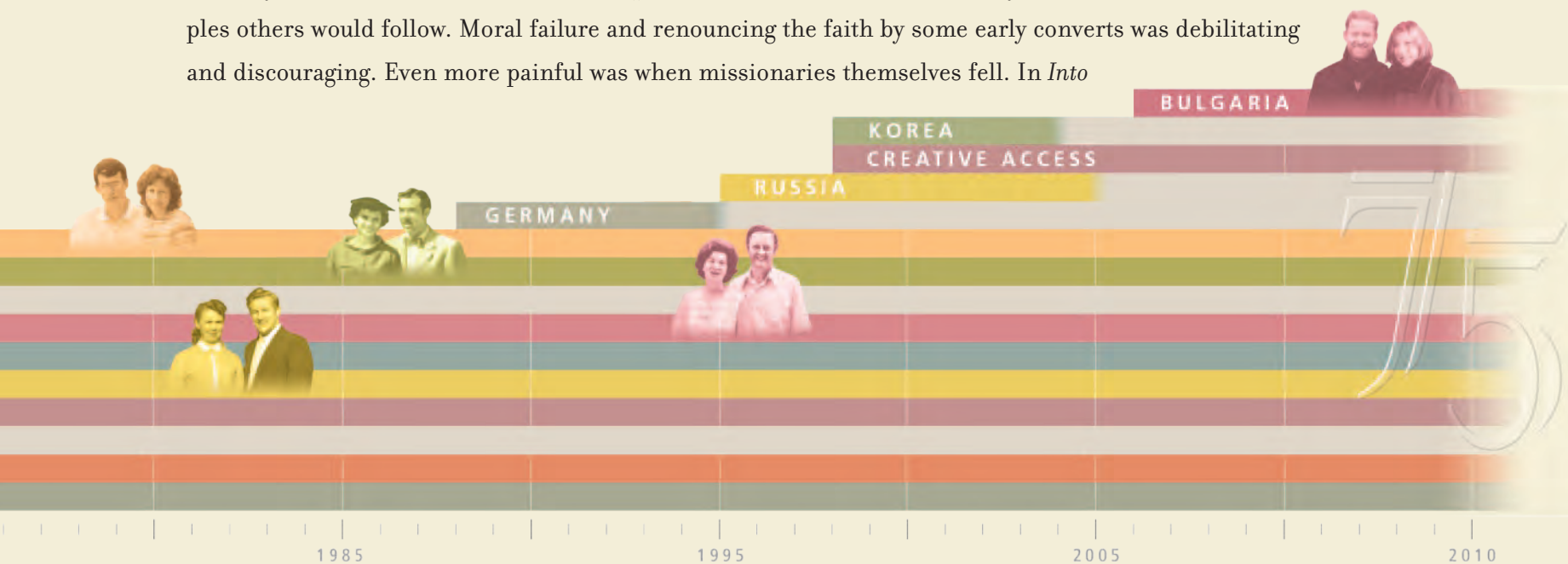
A prime example comes from the experience of Laura Belle Barnard herself. Upon arriving in Kotagiri, South India, Laura Belle learned of an earlier outreach effort to the Harijan (outcaste) people. A Scottish lady, Miss Cockburn, abandoned her outreach in the community. “Apparently, she had become thoroughly discouraged and withdrew, declaring confidently that she had found an ethnic group of subhumans who were decidedly incapable of responding to education or spiritual truth” [*Touching The Untouchables*, p. 15].

This did not dissuade Laura Belle.

When people enter our churches around the world, they usually do not come from the Nazarenes, Southern Baptists, or the Assemblies of God. They come from Animism, Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Islam, or Catholicism. We do not aim to rearrange the Kingdom, but to advance it.

This has been a laudable, but difficult road. Totally unreached people require much prayer and labor before harvest time. The early years were difficult as our pioneer missionaries painstakingly carved a church from the bedrock of superstition and false belief. Conversions were slow in coming. Leadership training was frustrating at times.

Early converts had few Christian examples within their own cultures. They, themselves, were the examples others would follow. Moral failure and renouncing the faith by some early converts was debilitating and discouraging. Even more painful was when missionaries themselves fell. In *Into*



The Darkness we acknowledge the contribution of those whose ministries did not end well. The message of their early years was true and their sacrifice worth noting.

Crucial to the cause was the willingness of pioneer missionaries who paid the price and remained faithful to the call. Wave after wave of missionaries followed the trailblazers. The promise on which they based their ministries was, “And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart” (NKJV).

Praise the Lord, on many of our fields it is now harvest time. The attendance in Free Will Baptist churches outside of North America has more than doubled within the past decade. Around the world, children are born into Free Will Baptist homes with parents who are second- and third-generation followers of Christ. The unrelenting faithfulness of missionaries and national pastors is now resulting in an exponential harvest.

As you read through *Into The Darkness* these are not the only changes you will recognize. Laura Belle would stare in disbelief at a sign on the front door of the church in Kotagiri which reads, “Please turn off your mobile phones.” In her day they did not even have electricity.

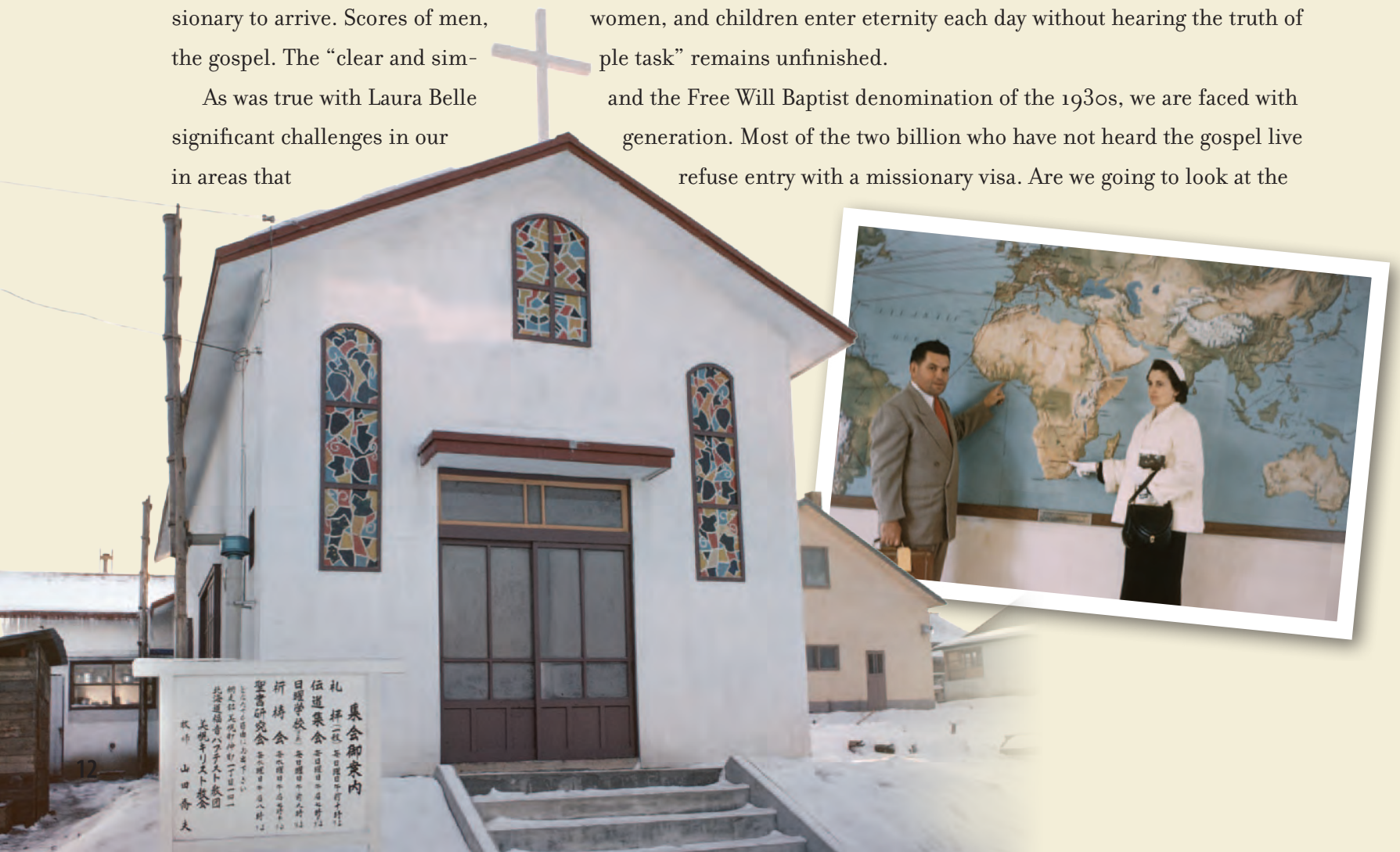
Some of our earliest missionaries served seven-year terms. It was just too expensive to make the long ocean voyages to and from the field more frequently. Visitors to the field were almost non-existent. Phone calls had to be arranged well in advance, or were only made in extreme circumstances because of prohibitive costs. Banking systems around the world were undependable and untrustworthy, making financial transactions and channeling support extremely challenging.

Things have certainly changed. Today, hundreds of Free Will Baptist teens and adults visit, see, and assist the works around the world firsthand. With the advent of the Internet, every missionary now has access not only to e-mail, but also to free video conferencing. Worldwide banking and property laws have strengthened, aiding the advancement of the Kingdom.

But, with all the changes, some things remain unchanged. Almost two billion people still have no access to the gospel. Cities, towns, and villages all over the world are waiting for the first witness, the first church, and the first missionary to arrive. Scores of men, women, and children enter eternity each day without hearing the truth of the gospel. The “clear and simple task” remains unfinished.

As was true with Laura Belle and the Free Will Baptist denomination of the 1930s, we are faced with significant challenges in our generation. Most of the two billion who have not heard the gospel live in areas that

refuse entry with a missionary visa. Are we going to look at the



challenges and say, “It’s too difficult?” or, “It’s too dangerous?”

This is *our* challenge. This is *our* calling. *Into The Darkness* is not only an attempt to chronicle the provisions of God and the faithfulness of His people in the past. The book, and the stories it contains, is meant to serve as an appeal—a challenge—to the current generation, and others who will follow, to continue piercing the darkness until the words of Jesus are fulfilled, “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and

then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14—NKJV).

This task demands the same spirit, creativity, and tenacity that existed in our earliest missionaries. If governments will not allow missionaries to enter with missionary visas, we will have to find other ways. Some will enter providing humanitarian aid. Others will teach in schools or hold various occupations. Some will start businesses. Some will birth creative alternatives.

Though the means of taking the gospel has changed through the years, and will most certainly change as we head into the future, the purpose itself should not. “We exist to

facilitate church planting movements among unreached peoples.” Winning people to Christ, making them disciples, and gathering them together to form a church will always be the call.

As we face this challenging future, new colleagues are coming alongside us. Free Will Baptists from our churches around the world are sensing the need and answering the call to reach more than their Jerusalem, and are reaching into *their* Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Over the next 25 years, this may be one of the most exciting developments we will see. By the time we celebrate our centennial in 2035, more Free Will Baptist missionaries may originate from our works internationally than from North America. If current growth trends continue, more Free Will Baptists will be worshipping in churches internationally than in the U.S.A.

Perhaps before the next 25 years have elapsed, we will all be gathered around the throne of Heaven to worship the Lord together. The Apostle John had the unique opportunity to see that scene in advance. He records it for us in Revelation 7:9-10, “After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”

As we look, we will see a Bengali man from India, a Lobi woman from Ivory Coast, and a Frenchman from Châteaubriant. Scanning the crowd further, we will see a former Shinto priest, a mountain villager from Panama, and a senorita from Alpedrete, Spain. Thousands upon thousands of our brothers and sisters in Christ from all over the world will be present because of the sacrifice and commitment of Free Will Baptists who were obedient to send and be sent.

Into The Darkness tells part of that story. Praise the Lord with us for those who will gather around the throne as a result of the labors of those whose story is contained herein, as well as those whose story is being lived today.



CUBA

No Crisis in Christ

Children played happily in the streets. The sounds of street vendors and the smell of rich Cuban food led to luxury hotels over-flowing with the rich and famous—Cuba in the 1940s. Cuba was an island paradise like no other.

Though poor in material possessions, they boasted a community of the richest relationships around.

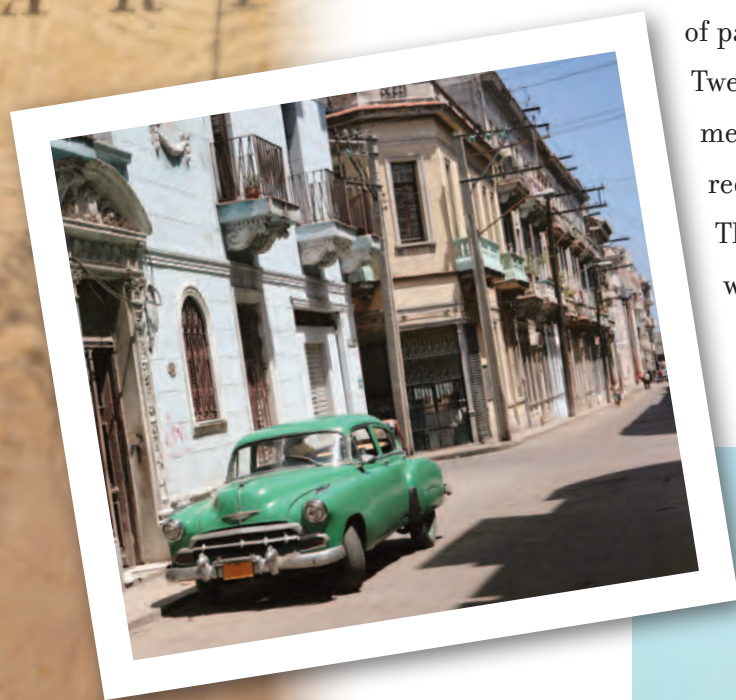
Such was the Cuba Tom and Mabel Willey encountered when they first arrived in 1941. It was easy to work with such an open people. The field seemed so ripe. Churches were planted. Missions started. The gospel spread, and missionaries were excited. The first Cuban Association of Free Will Baptists was formed. God was certainly working there.

But evil lurked around the corner. The unseen spiritual battle around them took on a physical face. Communism arrived with talons that tore into Cuba's heart and hope. In 1959, Fidel Castro led a revolution that overthrew the old, corrupt Batista regime, then established a socialist government in its place. The first few years of takeover were marked by a sellout of all luxury products, including cars, radios, record players, and more. The government tried to convey a positive spin on the new laws by raising certain salaries, but the rising inflation dwarfed the modest pay increases.

Within three years, Cubans began to feel the shock of deprivation. Contraband sales rose sharply since consumer products were in such limited supply. At one point, a single bar of soap sold for 80 American dollars. Each person was allowed exactly five and one-half pounds of rice, four ounces of beef, and one quart and a half of cooking oil—for a month. Only one dress or pair of pants, one pair of shoes, and one towel were permitted for the year. Twenty gallons of gas were allotted for every three months. Whatever medicine was available was watered down so that several doses were required to achieve results typically gained with one normal dose. The regime took over many small farms, and anyone caught stealing was sent to the firing squad.

Christians felt the noose even more tightly than others.

Though religious establishments were permitted to function, the

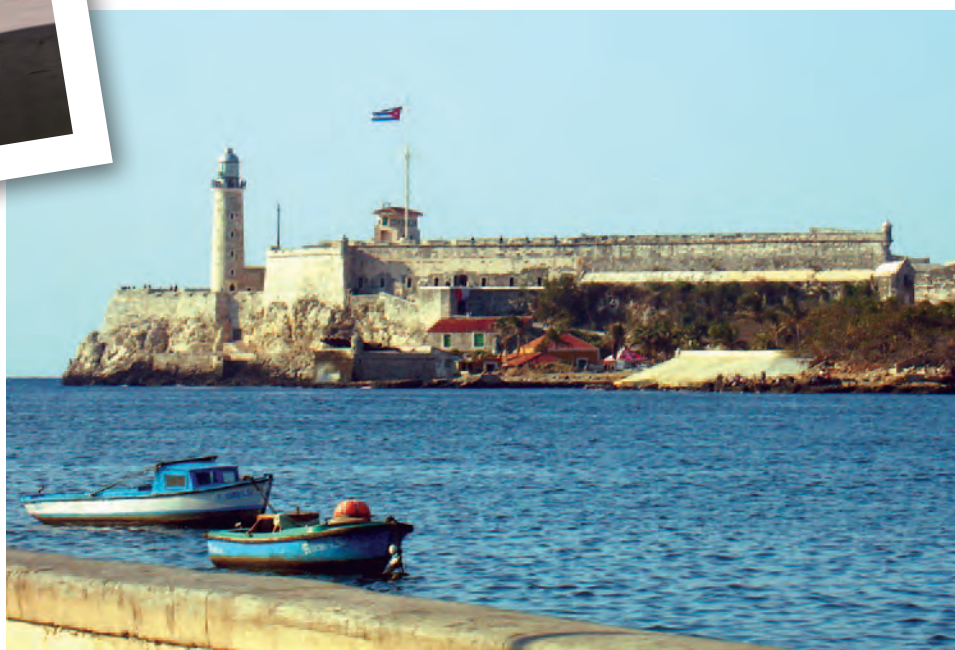


TOP: Fidel Castro and his regime are celebrated on a 1974 postage stamp.

LEFT: A lone American-made car is reminiscent of Havana's hey-day when cars and tourists lined its streets.

BOTTOM: Havana's once bustling harbor sparkles quietly in the sunlight.

FAR RIGHT: A typical 1940s farm with thatched-roof homes and palm trees dot the Cuban landscape.



government harassed church leaders. Intelligence agents were placed in every congregation to monitor preaching. Anyone who spoke an unapproved message was arrested. All religious activity outside the church was banned, including selling Bibles. Churches were required to submit a list of members' names, and pastors were permitted a limited number of personal visits to members. Children were not to be invited to services, and no one under 18 was allowed to join the church membership.

Due to the growing persecution, many believers were forced to leave the country. Missionaries once so eager and hopeful, left in sadness, hoping the churches begun might continue to survive.

But as God said in His Word, victory is “not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit” (Zechariah 4:6). In place of defeat, Christians drew strength and confidence from God. They learned how to work around socialist agendas. They utilized radio and printed literature in new and effective ways. They banded together to form a network of support for believers. They called on brothers and sisters in the United States to join them in prayer for courage, protection, and success.

God heard.

In fact, God was working all along. Though the communist regime hoped to stop the gospel's spark in Cuba, it fanned the people's fervor into flame. Stripped of everything, Christians realized they needed only

Christ. Told He was the answer to life, they now knew the truth by experience. They were willing to tithe what little they had, offer their service to God—and the churches began to grow exponentially.

By 1977, Cuban churches experienced 200% growth, rebuilding congregations back to the state of church affairs in 1961, when 15 organized churches and 25 mission/house churches existed. Though the socialist state

of the government persisted, so did the determination of Cuban believers. As of 2004, there were 40 established churches, 96 missions, and 10 house churches across the island.

What does it feel like to lose everything, and why did God ordain it? Just ask a Cuban believer. He is likely to close his eyes and smile, reminiscent of the words of Jesus:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.

J O H N 12 : 24



Mission Facts

Undeterred by communism, more than 5,300 men and women gather weekly in more than 90 FWB churches and almost 200 smaller gatherings dotting the island nation. Cubans are sharing the gospel message in Spain, Panama, and the United States, as well as throughout their country.



C U B A

CAPITAL	Havana
LARGEST CITY	Havana
AREA	110,860 sq. km.
POPULATION	11,451,652
CURRENCY	Cuban Peso
PER CAPITA INCOME	\$9,500
RELIGIONS	
	Roman Catholic 42.3%
	Non-religious 35.5%
	Ethnic religions 17.2%
	Evangelical Christian 4.6%
	Unreached People Groups 2

Sources: CIA World Factbook, Joshua Project

CHRIST IS THE ANSWER

The Tom and Mabel Willey Story



A tropical paradise spread before their eyes when Tom and Mabel Willey first looked out across the island of Cuba in 1941. Towering palms swayed in the breeze, silhouetted against an azure sky. Crystal blue waters reflected the impressive Havana skyline. Though the homes dotting the villages were modest at best, these pioneer Cuban missionaries were delighted to find a warm reception among the Cuban people who seemed so eager to help and to listen. Where they lacked money, the Cuban people compensated in hospitality and kindness.

It did not take long to make inroads into the community. In 1943, the Willeys opened their work in Pinar del Río in western Cuba. They also purchased property nearby, where they built the “Cedars of Lebanon,” Cuba’s first Bible institute. In the same year, the Willeys organized the Cuban Association of Free Will Baptists, with a small membership of 76, though 200 more were awaiting baptism. Within one year’s time, five more churches surrounding Pinar del Río were developed.

Impressive statistics, to be sure. But the growing number of converts represented more than simply persuasive speaking. The Willeys’ warmth and love touched Cuban hearts at every status of society. Whether visiting a lowly field hand or an upper-class dignitary, Mabel and Tom had a unique gift that made each person feel important, loved, and respected. Their beautiful blend of compassion and determined purpose, powerful speech, and empathetic listening melted even the toughest resistance.



Before long, Cubans everywhere referred to Mabel and Tom as “Mom” and “Pop” Willey, affectionately welcoming them as a part of the Cuban family. The Willeys’ own children, Tom Jr. and Barbara, grew up as a part of that culture, following in the loving footsteps of their parents.

In 1960, the Cuban climate changed dramatically. Fidel Castro and his army overthrew the existing government and established a communist regime. New policies demanded that all missionaries exit the country—Mom and Pop Willey included. Not to be outdone, the Willeys moved to Miami where hundreds of Cuban refugees sought shelter. They continued their work developing Christian leaders and establishing churches among the Cubans, in the political safety of the United States.

Six years later, the Willeys faced a personal crisis that rivaled anything experienced in Cuba. Tom Willey Sr. was diagnosed with cancer. Though he fought his disease as tenaciously as he preached, he was unable to resist God’s call home in 1968. Mabel, equally determined, continued her work in Miami as she prayed for the church in Cuba, hoping that one day she might return.

At last, 17 years after leaving Cuba, Mabel Willey was invited to return to the country that still held her heart. Her visit was both wonderful and sorrowful at the same time. It was a joy to see old friends and visit places she and Tom experienced together. But she noticed that the spirit of joy and friendliness had been replaced with a colder, more task-oriented culture. Despite communism’s harsh impact on the community, she was thrilled to find the churches growing and the believers eager to continue God’s work, not only on their own island, but all around the world as well.

After a long life of dedicated ministry, “Mom” Willey went home to Jesus on January 16, 1998. Her legacy—her children and the many lives she touched—live on to continue the work God began through her and Tom.

*I have no greater joy than
to hear that my children
walk in truth.*

3 JOHN 4

FAR LEFT: Rolla Smith stands with a group of Cuban church leaders and Pop Willey (kneeling).

LEFT: Dressed for church

UPPER RIGHT: The Willey family (Barbara, Tom Sr., Mabel, and Tom Jr.) take a moment to pose for a family picture.

RIGHT: The Willeys’ home still stands on the property of the Cedars of Lebanon Seminary in Pinar del Río.





LEFT: A small group of faithful believers stand before their church.

BELOW: Pop Willey traveled throughout the denomination sharing his missions vision. He stands here (third from left) with John Lee, Cornelius Vause, and Evander Robinson of South Carolina.



BELOW: Many young ladies benefitted from training at the Cedars of Lebanon Bible Institute.

BOTTOM LEFT: Tom Willey Sr. loomed over the average Cuban, but his genuine love for them quickly won them over.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Mabel Willey was well respected by the Cuban pastors and lay leaders.



LOS CEDROS DEL LIBANO (THE CEDARS OF LEBANON)

Ariel was hanging out with his friends in a dark alley of Havana—as usual. Smoke swirled around their heads as they lit cigarettes and downed a few more drinks, waiting for some action. Suddenly, a group of people appeared around the corner. Ariel was determined to block their path. But before he reached them, a young girl approached him, instead, and held out a tract. “God loves you,” she said sweetly. Then the group walked past.

Despite the taunts of his fellow gang members, Ariel was intrigued. He kept the tract and referred to it for weeks as he tried to understand its content. At last, he found a Free Will Baptist church where members were happy to explain. Through the girl, the church, and the power of the Holy Spirit, Ariel became a dedicated Christian, eager to reach out to his own community with the hope of the gospel that saved him.

Fortunately for Ariel, God was already at work in Cuba preparing the way for young men like him to receive the training they needed to reach Cuba for Christ. In 1941, Tom and Mabel Willey, Free Will Baptist pioneer missionaries to Cuba, purposed to establish a training institute designed to reach and train local Cubans for missions. After much prayer and searching the Scriptures, the Willeys contacted the West Indies Mission located in the middle province of Cuba to ask for teacher recommendations. They quickly suggested Rafael

Josue, a young and gifted teacher who was willing to make the sacrifice required to start the new school near Pinar del Río.

The institute was launched in 1943 with seven students and Rafael teaching. God used Rafael greatly to transform that first, meager building into a beautiful campus where young men and women trained for service. Rafael and Tom Willey Sr. were opposite personality types that complemented one another perfectly. Tom provided vision, while Rafael filled in with details and follow-through effort.

Ariel and many other native Cubans attended what became known as Los Cedros del Libano, or the Cedars of Lebanon Bible Institute. While attending classes, students were given work on the institute grounds to help with upkeep, and on weekends they were assigned to a church or mission where each student served. Classes were taught by various pastors who made up the faculty. Every week two different pastors

rotated through the teaching schedule for the semester.

After the standard three-year term for seminary training, students spent six months exclusively in the ministry assigned to them. Following their internship, a final semester of classroom work was completed before they served a minimum of two years as a local pastor. If all went well, the student was then eligible for ordination.

The road to equipping the saints was long and hard. Tom and Mabel Willey, Rafael Josue and his family, and many others gave of their time, energy, and comfort to see the vision fulfilled. But each institute pioneer strongly believed that no one wielded a greater influence in the Cuban community than Cuba’s own youth who sought to change their homeland for Christ. It was a deep, life-long investment. But the dividends of so many souls saved and ministries multiplied were well worth the price.



ABOVE: Tom Willey Sr. (lower right) poses with a group of Cedars of Lebanon students.

COMING HOME

The Tom and Emma Ruth Willey Story

*The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save,
he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love,
he will joy over thee with singing.*

Z E P H A N I A H 3 : 1 7



Tom Willey Jr. considered Cuba home, though born to American missionaries “Pop” and “Mom” Willey. Missionary life was what he knew best. As a matter of fact, it was all he knew. Yet God used a near-fatal accident in Cuba, when Tom Jr. was 13, to personalize God’s truth. Injured so severely they feared he might be an invalid the rest of his life, Tom witnessed God’s mighty strength at work in his life and limbs. He soon regained full use of his body, in spite of doctors’ predictions. He realized that God spared his life for a purpose, and he intended to live his entire life for God’s glory.

Though Tom went on to complete his studies stateside, attending both Free Will Baptist Bible College and Columbia Bible College, his heart always turned toward Latin America. Emma Ruth Bennett, a fellow student at FWBBC, also felt drawn to missions and joined Tom Jr. in his commitment to evangelize the Latin world through God’s strength. They married in 1955, Tom graduated, and they were appointed to Cuba in 1956.

He was delighted to be back home, and even more excited to see what God was doing in the churches begun years earlier. “What a thrill it was to see the number of new faces in the churches there,” Tom remarked. Tom and Emma Ruth immersed themselves in ministry, reaching out to Cubans through radio, church programs, and an emphasis on the training ministry through the Cedars of Lebanon Bible Institute. The churches flourished, and large numbers of Cubans came to Christ and trained for ministry.

Unfortunately, Christianity was not the only ideology on the move. Communism reared its ugly head, and by 1961 was overtaking the island. Missionaries were ordered to leave the country. Churches were placed under tight governmental



ABOVE: Tom Willey Jr. visits members of a rural church.

RIGHT: Tom Jr. returned to Cuba in 1997 and addressed the Cuban Women’s Auxiliary Convention. During that visit he was honored to baptize several new converts.



reigns, and Cuban Christians were often persecuted in large and small ways.

Sixteen years passed. Tom spent the time in Panama, developing a beach-head of Free Will Baptist churches along the coast. Tom was enthusiastic about the Board of Foreign Missions' invitation for him to return to Cuba in 1977 for a

visit and report on the country.

Tom returned to a very different Cuba. The people were colder and more aloof under the communist regime. The island itself showed significant progress, with many paved roads replacing old dirt paths and new buildings and facili-

ties where shacks once stood. Electricity reached even the most rural homes, and activity and governmental prosperity seemed evident, even in the countryside.

Most surprising were the flourishing churches. Though only one-third of the members remained faithful through the communist oppression, their work multiplied and produced bountiful fruit. "From that remnant the Lord has built His church back to what it previously was," Tom commented. "So you might say the church has had a growth of 200% in the last 16 years."

How did they succeed? A layman explained: "We exhorted each person to never lose an opportunity to give the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to every soul that needed it...going ahead with the church no matter what the situation was. Each of us, united as in the primitive church, was endeavoring to be a missionary and to let Christ be the center of his life."

In 1988, Tom joined the Cubans again to lead the dedication service for the reopening of the Cedars of Lebanon Seminary. More than 400 people crowded into the facility built for 200 people. Again, Tom was amazed! God was truly building His house—even through pain and persecution—and the gates of hell could not prevail against it.

FAITH IN ACTION

Militino Martinez's Story

Militino Martinez was unable to figure them out. Why did a nice couple from the United States come to his country? Why did they act like they loved the Cuban people? What made them give up their lives to serve someone else?

Militino knew the answers to his questions must lie in the Willey's message. This beloved couple, affectionately called "Mom" and "Pop" Willey, taught the people about the love of Christ and His provision on the cross. Then they actually proved their belief through consistent, godly living.

Militino was convinced. Jesus must be real if He could cause people to love like the Willeys did, he concluded. Militino Martinez gave his life to Christ and became an avid student at the Cedars of Lebanon Bible Institute where Tom Willey often taught. In his new enthusiasm and joy in Christ, Militino helped start several new churches on the island, even while completing his studies.

God used the Willeys and the institute training in major ways through Militino. When Cuban officials forced him to leave his island, he started a church in Miami, Florida. Later, God led him to serve as director of the Hispanic Department of the Christian and Missionary Alliance Mission, work with the New York Bible Society, pastor a church in New Jersey, and eventually travel to Spain to assist a church in Tarragona.



TOP: Tom Jr. and his sister Barbara provide music for street ministry.

BOTTOM: Emma Ruth, an accomplished musician, delighted in playing for church services.



GOD'S SERVANT

The Bessie Yeley Story

And the LORD came, and stood, and called as at other times, Samuel, Samuel. Then Samuel answered, Speak; for thy servant heareth.

1 SAMUEL 3:10



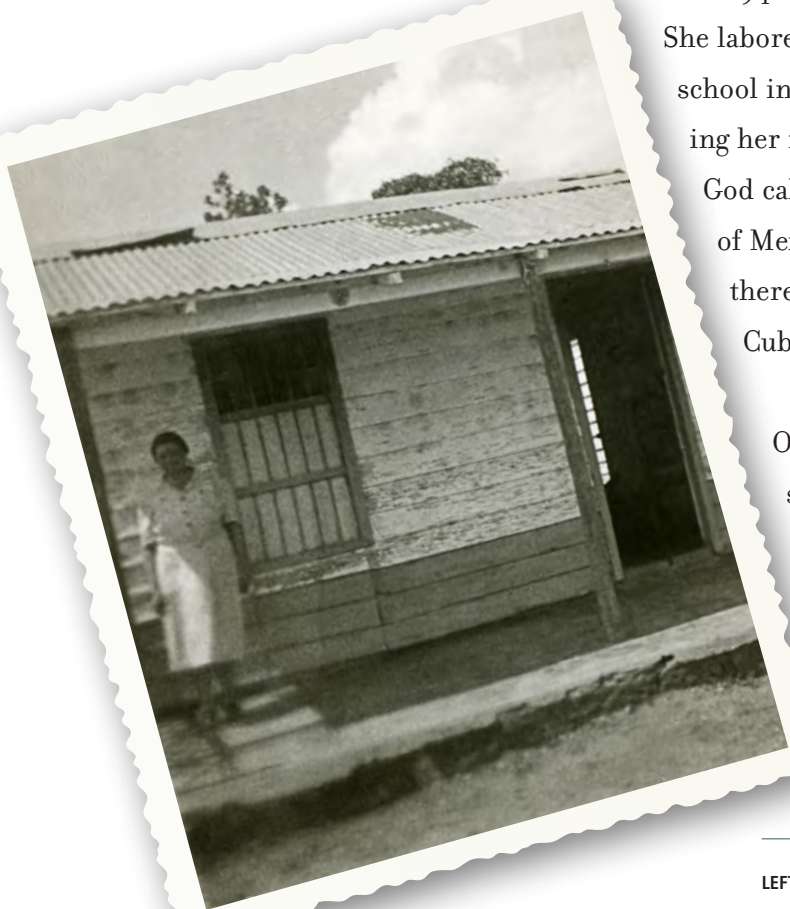
Bessie Yeley was used to serving. Born November 26, 1895, into a family of 10 other children, she knew almost instinctively what work was required to manage people and the logistics of living. She grew up working in and caring for the Porter Free Will Baptist Church in Portsmouth, Ohio. To Bessie, no task was too small or menial. Did the lanterns need to be carried? She did it. Was it time to empty the stove ashes from the center aisle of the church? She complied on time. She also taught Sunday school, played the pump organ, kept the church books, and did whatever was needed when the opportunity arose.

So when a missionary from Bolivia, South America, came to a nearby church and told the congregation about the great need for more workers, Bessie was touched. She went home immediately and began to pray for God to raise up workers to help those missionaries. Just as she was about to rise from her knees, she heard God whisper, “Why don’t you go?”

This was no menial task. It was the biggest calling of her life. Bessie was humbled and excited to accept. She studied at a Bible college held in Temple Baptist Church and finished her training in Kansas City, Missouri. Then she left the states for Venezuela under the Faith Baptist Mission, and finally found her home in Free Will Baptist Foreign Missions in 1938, with the full blessing of her home church.

In 1942, Bessie left Venezuela and joined Tom and Mabel Willey in Cuba. She labored for 12 years in the Bible institute and faithfully taught Sunday school in the villages on weekends. Children gravitated toward her, sensing her nurturing spirit and Christ-born love for each of them. Eventually, God called Bessie to leave Cuba and begin working along the border of Mexico in Nogales, Arizona. She served immigrants and refugees there for three years before she moved to Miami to help work with the Cuban refugees.

At age 60, Bessie Yeley finally returned to her home state of Ohio where she organized Bible clubs and taught Bible classes for senior citizens in the Portsmouth area. She never considered herself retired because she knew God’s call to missions was for life. When a Christian’s heart is surrendered to the Lord, evangelism happens—no matter the place. Until her death on January 23, 1969, Bessie spoke to others on behalf of missions. She challenged young and old alike with the same words God spoke to her: “Why don’t you go?” And many did.



LEFT: Bessie Yeley stands on the porch of her humble, tin-roofed house in Cuba.

CUBAN REFUGEES FIND SAFE HAVEN IN CHRIST

Miami residents had no idea. Neither did anyone else in the U.S. To think that just 90 miles south of Florida's tip was an island of desperate people starving, suffering, and fighting disease was almost incomprehensible. But Cuba's nasty secret was not kept for long.

Fidel Castro and his socialist regime overthrew the Cuban government in 1961. Although Batista's regime was corrupt, Castro added a new component—a miserable bondage under atheism. As he sought to establish power, Castro destroyed factories, fields, and families who opposed communist ideology. Food rations were so scant people became malnourished, even emaciated. Each person was allotted one banana per day, and one egg and a half of a pound of beans for an entire week. Medicines sent from America were confiscated, and only severely diluted, inferior medicines were allowed for the poor.

It is not surprising that thousands of Cuban refugees fled to neighboring Miami when Castro permitted certain people to leave the island. Each week, more than 2,000 people arrived on American soil with nothing but the clothes on their backs, grateful for the chance to start a new life in a free country. Many refugees risked their lives in inadequate boats as they crossed the stretch of treacherous Caribbean waters to the Florida Keys. Often the American Coast Guard found rafts packed with refugees who were

without food and water. Some died, but others were taken to American hospitals where they received the care they so desperately needed.

Free Will Baptist missionaries and church members were also eager to help in the dire circumstances. Tom Willey Sr. and others immediately helped establish CERF—the Cuban Emergency Relief Fund—to meet the basic needs of food, clothing, shelter, and medical care for refugees as they arrived. They called on churches across the nation to assist financially, in prayer, and through clothing donations. The response was truly miraculous.

After meeting their physical needs, church leaders were surprised and delighted to discover an increased openness toward the gospel message. Cubans who once professed atheism under the communist regime experienced the reality of God's presence during their harrowing escapes. In the midst of utter weakness, they craved to know the God

who promised to sustain them. Willey and others formed teams to go through the refugee communities distributing tracts and sharing how Christ provides true freedom. In addition, they helped establish several Spanish-speaking churches throughout the Miami area to disciple the rapidly growing number of new believers.

Even though Castro attempted to replace Christianity with communist sentiment, God was greater still. Oppression actually opened more opportunities for the gospel. Through pain and suffering came tremendous triumph. As Joseph said to his brothers who betrayed him,

But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive.

GENESIS 50:20



ABOVE: Cuban pastor Benito Rodriguez and Mabel Willey lovingly welcome Cuban refugees to Miami.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Cuban Missionary Support: the Dodds, Wilfongs, Phenicies, and Miss Wisehart

*N*o role in missions is particularly glamorous. It takes commitment, obedience, and hard work to carry out the Great Commission. Even then, only a handful of missionaries receive mention back home. But God is also at work in the lives of the lesser known—the faithful few who labor diligently, often without any recognition, seeking simply to serve the God they love and to make Him known.

Damon Dodd and his wife, Sylvia, are such a couple. The Dodds went to Cuba in 1944 to labor alongside pioneer missionaries Thomas and Mabel Willey. Damon served as business manager and bookkeeper for the mission and taught in the Bible institute. He also traveled to different preaching points between Havana and Matanzas. When Sylvia became ill in 1946, the couple returned to the States where she received proper treatment, and Damon continued his evangelism outreach as pastor, and later as promotional secretary of the National Association of Free Will Baptists.

Bob and Jerri Wilfong joined the Willeys in Cuba in 1949. Bob helped in “just about everything” at the Cedars of Lebanon Bible Institute. He taught, did mechanical and repair work, acted as chauffeur, helped with the music, and assisted “Pop” in many ways, while Jerri performed secretarial work for the school.

Herbert and Edith Phenicie also served in Cuba in 1948 under “Practical Missionary Training” with Christian and Missionary Alliance, working intermittently with the Willeys. By 1953, they returned to Cuba on a full-time basis as Free Will Baptist maintenance missionaries. Herbert’s chief job was to keep the Cedars of Lebanon Bible Institute property in working order. Though he spoke only a little Spanish, his rapport with students helped the team work together to accomplish goals.

Miss Lucy Wisehart also had a heart for Cuba and left the States for service in 1953. She worked for three years as secretary-bookkeeper for the Cedars of Lebanon Bible Institute. As she learned Spanish, she worked in



UPPER RIGHT: Damon and Sylvia Dodd’s ministry was cut short by her illness.

MIDDLE: Bob and Jerri Wilfong served three years in Cuba.

BOTTOM: Herbert and Edith Phenicie helped to keep the institute property in order for six years.

RIGHT: Lucy Wisehart frequently used the accordion in her ministry.

daily vacation Bible schools, with the young people, and in the music ministry. Later, she married Cuban pastor Felix Lima. Together they served two different churches in Cuba until they left in 1961.

What was the net result of their daily obedience in the minutia of missionary life? Hundreds of changed lives. A Bible institute that continues to equip national Christian leaders today. And most importantly, the smile of God who saw every act of service and said, “Well done, good and faithful servants.”

*His lord said unto him,
Well done, thou good and faithful servant:
thou hast been faithful over a few things,
I will make thee ruler over many things:
enter thou into the joy of thy lord.*

M A T T H E W 2 5 : 2 1



ESTHER RUEHLE

left the States in 1957 to serve as a nurse in Cuba. The need for nurses in Brazil was greater than in Cuba, so after two years she returned to the States and then later departed for Brazil.

TOP: Mom Willey and Lucy Wisheart stand with Cuban Christians on the porch of a house on the institute property.

MIDDLE: The Cuban Association meets in the newly built Thomas H. Willey Tabernacle at Cedars of Lebanon.

RIGHT: Mabel Willey stands with Raymond Riggs, the first general director of Foreign Missions.

