

Nigerian Baptists

Celebrate 150 Years of Gospel Witness

One of Southern Baptists' oldest mission fields has been a springboard for spreading the gospel across an entire continent.

But there's still more work to be done.

Articles by Sue Sprenkle ■ Photos by Bob Siddens

■ Above: Leading the celebration, a band director motions for the crowd of 10,000 people to join in praising God. The orchestra accompanied the choir for the week-long celebration.



■ *Above:* Nigeria President Olusegun Obasanjo raises his hands to heaven as he encourages a stadium full of his fellow countrymen to follow God's path.

"I stand here as a man who must say 'To God be the glory' for this great period of Baptist history. May God grant to us more fruitful years of service."

—Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo



■ *Above:* Thomas J. Bowen began Baptist work in Nigeria in 1850 in the town of Abeokuta. He was joined later by his wife, Lurena Henrietta.

The Nigerian women stopped washing their clothes and stared at the "crazy," white missionary women. The missionaries—decked out in long, flowing skirts and pith helmets—searched frantically for a way to cross the stream. They wanted to talk to the Yoruba women who'd been doing laundry on the other side.

Finally, a bright idea struck. The missionaries found a large calabash (gourd), crawled into the water with it and hung on for dear life. Meanwhile, one missionary decided to ford the stream, sitting in a wash basin with her legs flapping over the side. The scene was enough to cause the Yoruba women to drop their chores and listen to the missionaries tell of a Christ they did not know.

Travel on the mission field may have changed since the 1800s, when these missionaries took their trek, but the message is still the same—Jesus Christ is Lord. Southern Baptists have spent the last 150 years taking that message to the continent of Africa.

Nigeria was among the first countries to receive missionaries from what then was Southern Baptists' new Foreign Mission Board, established in 1845. Thomas Jefferson Bowen set sail for Nigeria in 1850. He began his ministry in the town of Abeokuta.

One hundred and fifty years later, when Nigerian Baptists gathered to celebrate their heritage in the town where their history began, they heard from one of their most famous sons—Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo.

"This is one of the most fulfilling hours of my life," Obasanjo said. "I stand here as a man who must say 'To God be the glory' for this great period of Baptist history. May God grant to us more fruitful years of service."

The president singled out the International Mission Board (formerly the Foreign Mission Board) and thanked Southern Baptists for planting the seeds of the gospel and working diligently to nurture and grow the Nigerian Christians.

"Their work has influenced millions of Nigerians and other African countries. I speak as one of those touched by their work," he said.

Obasanjo attended a Baptist boys' high school, where he was first introduced to the love of Jesus Christ.

Continued on page 36.



IMB historical photos by GEORGE GREEN

Continued from page 35.

A historical look

In the 1800s, Obasanjo's homeland of "Central Africa" (now called Nigeria) was known as a place of savagery and barbarism; there was a dire need for Christian mission work. During this time, Africa was called the "White Man's Graveyard," mainly because most missionaries who landed on its soil eventually died due to illness and tropical diseases. More than half of the early missionaries either died or returned home due to illness.

Against these odds, Southern Baptists' first missionary to Nigeria—Bowen—started his ministry in Abeokuta. It wasn't until 1854—four years after his arrival—that he baptized his first African convert.

Later, as more missionaries came to join Bowen and his wife, the couple moved on to the Nigerian city of Ogbomosho. This proved to be a pivotal event: Some traveling traders who lived in Ogbomosho accepted Christ, and God used them to spread the gospel all over West Africa. Meanwhile, as the Civil War in the United States raged, missionaries in Nigeria were forced to return home due to lack of financial support. Nigerian Baptists continued the work on their own, confirming

■ *Left:* In the early 1900s, missionaries lived in this Ogbomosho home and also helped to build a dispensary building. George Green (bottom, right) baptizes a new believer.

■ *Above:* A group of Yoruba women, in 1910, stop outside their home in Ogbomosho on their way to gather water. Yoruba Christians helped spread the gospel across West Africa.

the concept of "indigenous leadership." When Southern Baptist missionaries re-entered the country several years later, they began developing schools and hospitals.

Their methods of evangelism varied and were not so different from means employed today. Missionaries visited house to house, preached in markets to anyone who would listen, witnessed as they taught people to read and healed their wounds.

They also regularly led evangelistic campaigns.

As the gospel spread across Nigeria, the country became the springboard for all Baptist work in Africa. Nigerian Christian traders shared their faith as they traveled in and out of Benin, Ghana and Togo. Small pockets of believers developed along the trade routes, and these converts began asking for missionaries and pastors.

Later, in the 1950s, Southern Baptists expanded their work in Africa, sending Nigerian missionaries to Ghana. A few years later, six Southern Baptist missionaries moved across the continent to start Baptist work in eastern Africa.

Today Southern Baptist missionaries, their African Baptist co-workers and other Great Commission Christians are making plans to take the gospel to every people group on the continent.

Continued on page 38.





■ Above: Local churches were filled to capacity in Abeokuta during the National Baptist Convention. Others were forced to find shade from the midday sun.



■ Above: Delegates for the 150th Nigerian Baptist Convention could be identified by bright identification badges.

“The reason Nigerian Baptists have been blessed is that they are taking the gospel to the world.”



■ Above: Rejoicing and singing, more than 20,000 Nigerians gathered to celebrate 150 years of Baptist history and to look to the future of great things to come.

Continued from page 36.

Spreading the gospel

Perennial leaders in evangelism, Nigerian Baptists in 1999 started 851 churches and baptized 30,150 people—a long way from the Nigerian Baptist Convention’s statistics in 1887, when there were only five churches and 149 members. Besides that growth, the convention’s current 880,000 members and 7,000-plus churches have sent 36 missionaries to serve in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea.

But even with these advances, Nigerians’ need for Christ is as great as it was 150 years ago. Nigeria is a divided country with the north dominated by Muslims, the south by Christians. Several of the northern states are governed under the Islamic law, called *Shari’a*, which allows such punishment as amputation for the crime of stealing. In other parts of the country, traditional African religions—such as ancestor worship—reign supreme.

Currently, more than 140 unreached people groups live in Nigeria. IMB mis-

sionaries and Nigerian Baptists are working side-by-side to bring the gospel to them and other lost people in Nigeria—and beyond.

“I believe the reason Nigerian Baptists have been blessed is that they are taking the gospel to the world,” Jerry Rankin, IMB president, told Christians gathered at the Nigerian Baptist Convention earlier this year. “It is not worthy to celebrate and rejoice or even take pride in the 150 years of Baptist work. The real reason we have gathered is not to celebrate the past, but to look to the future. Because of the power of God, you will continue to bear fruit.” □

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■ Right: A Girl in Action watches from the stands as President Olusegun Obasanjo walks to the podium. GAs, Acteens and Royal Ambassadors train future Baptist leaders.



Alma Rohm

has earned such respect in Nigeria that a Nigerian king has even made her a chief. But it's the "King of Kings" who keeps her there.

The young woman rummaged around in her luggage, searching for space to squeeze in a large snail shell. Missionary Alma Rohm didn't want to leave it behind, for it reminded her of the Nigerian Baptist Girl's School where she had spent time teaching. Finally, she tied it to the outside of her bag and boarded the train.

When she arrived in Iwo, Nigeria, the young woman got some strange looks. Many people even ran to get out of her way.



"I didn't know it at the time, but a snail shell tied like that meant powerful voodoo. Everyone thought I was a white witch doctor instead of a missionary," recalls Alma. "I've learned a lot in the past 50 years. Most of it has been through trial and error."

Alma is the longest-serving Southern Baptist missionary in Nigeria, one of Southern Baptists' oldest mission fields. She set sail for Nigeria in 1950. At the time, there were only 600 Southern Baptist missionaries working in about 50 countries. Fifty years later, the International Mission Board has nearly 5,000 missionaries sharing the gospel in more than 150 countries.

Alma's ministry began at a girls' school, but she has spent more than 48 years of her service at the Baptist college in Iwo. She has done everything from teaching preschool children to teaching pastors to working in the Baptist medical clinic.

When Alma began working in Iwo, the only Christians in town were the few

Europeans living there. "Iwo was recognized as a Muslim town at the time. It was a place where people sent their sons to study Islam," she says. "We still have many mosques, but there are just as many (Christian) churches now."

Everyone in town knows Alma. Even the king of the province opens his door to drop-in visits by the missionary.

As Alma enters the room, the king bows to show his respect for her. The gesture embarrasses her, especially when he tells two visiting kings that Alma isn't really an American but is Nigerian and serves as a chief on his council.

Alma actually was installed as a chief in 1982. Since then, she has been formally addressed around town as "Chief Miss Alma Rohm." She shrugs off the title and contends that she has only done what the Lord called her to do when she was a second-grader in a small Waco, Texas, church.

"The reason that I've been here so long is the Lord called me here, and He hasn't told me to go yet," Alma says. "I wouldn't dream of missing the look on someone's face when they realize for the first time that God is the Father of Jesus."

"There are still so many who need to hear about our Lord, and I'm going to keep sharing." □

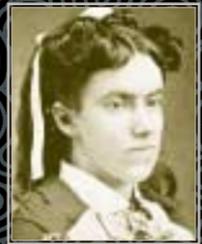
■ *Above:* International Mission Board missionary Alma Rohm is recognized for 50 years of service in Nigeria during the 150th celebration of Baptist work in Nigeria.

REACH OUT

Celebrate with Nigerian Baptists on their 150th anniversary and with Alma Rohm on her 50 years of missionary service.

Send greetings to Nigerian Baptists:
Dr. Samuel Ola Fadeji
General Secretary
Nigerian Baptist Convention
PMB 5113
Ibadan
NIGERIA

Send greetings to Alma Rohm,
whose birthday is Nov. 11:
P. O. Box 531
Iwo, Osun State
NIGERIA



Lottie's journey continues

in God's world today

Lottie Moon, compelled by God's vision for our world, began her journey of faith and sacrifice as a missionary to China in 1873. Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board, inspired by this same vision reflects on this journey through his own call and missionary service nearly a century later.

Today each of us is invited to continue the journey to which God called Lottie Moon. Learn how you can join God to reach the peoples of His world with the good news of His Son Jesus Christ.

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