

Glorieta Conference Center





In the mid-1940s, Baptists talked of the possibility of a convention assembly in the west to correspond to Ridgcrest in the east. Committees were appointed, conversations continued, and competition developed. Dr. Harry P. Stagg, then Executive Secretary for New Mexico Baptists, proposed that it should be located high in the cool, green mountains of New Mexico that could conveniently serve the growing western part of the United States. And, he believed that it could be used all year long.

Dr. Stagg, firmly convinced that he had found the perfect site, invited the selection committee to New Mexico. He hoped to sell them on a beautiful, pine-covered mountain valley location on the Pecos River that had been used as a guest ranch. However, only an hour before the committee gathered and much to Dr. Stagg's disappointment, he received news that the property had been sold to be used as the location for a Benedictine Monastery.

Dr. Stagg's faith was undaunted! Soon he learned that the Breese Ranch, containing 800 acres near Glorieta, was for sale for a purchase price of \$50,000. Since the SBC had agreed that any state wanting the "western assembly" should be willing to provide the land as a gift, and, since New Mexico Baptists numbered less than 35,000 in 166 churches, an enormous task was before the Baptist Convention of New Mexico (BCNM).

But, putting down \$1,000 and taking a 30-day option to buy the ranch, Dr. Stagg went to work!

Special gifts from individual churches, the sale of property owned by the state convention, and additional gifts came. The final payment check was the largest that the NM Convention had written to that time. The site was bought on faith! BCNM owned the ranch for two years after which the Southern Baptist Executive Committee authorized in June, 1949 the official development of the western assembly located at Glorieta, New Mexico.

Prior to actual acceptance of the site, additional land adjacent to the Breese Ranch was purchased by NM Baptists in order to protect the assembly grounds from possible undesirable developments. Those land purchases, and trades with the National Forest Service, have resulted in the LifeWay Christian Resources now holding title to more than 2,400 acres located on both sides of Interstate 25 with a total highway frontage of almost two miles.

Except for the little village of Glorieta, the conference center continues to be surrounded by more than 380,000 acres of Santa Fe National Forest, of which 134,000 is Pecos National Wilderness.

The First Conference

Pioneer Week at Glorieta. Those present will long remember August 7-13, 1952. There were 1,417 persons registered from 18 states, and many others dropped in for services during the week. Dr. T. L. Holcomb, then Executive Secretary-Treasurer of the Baptist Sunday School Board, was in the group. So was Dr. James L. Sullivan who later succeeded Dr. Holcomb.

Many guests, program personnel, and dignitaries camped in tents, somewhat reminiscent of the Apache Indians who once camped in teepees on these same grounds. Others slept in campers, trailers, or station wagons, and many tossed their sleeping bags down in a semi-complete Texas Hall (now Texas Main). Meals were prepared in Santa Fe and brought out on a flat-bed truck and served in a big, red, circus-tent.

The program was inspiring and optimistic as men of faith and vision spoke of their hopes and prayers for the new assembly. All agreed it should primarily be a church leadership training center for every phase of Baptist life and work, and a place of decision and life dedication.

The first full summer of conferences was in 1953. Church Music Week started on June 8, followed by Foreign Mission Week and Home Mission Board's Western Conference. In late June and early July, WMU and YWA met. Bible Conference began on July 13, with two Sunday School Weeks to follow. Three Training Union Weeks were held in August, and the last week of "summer" was Student Retreat and Writers' Conference.

Building the Campus

The first unit of NM Hall was started in the spring of 1952; additions were made in 1960 and 1962. This building is the administration center with offices, registration area, post office, first aid station, Chuckwagon (refreshment area), Baptist Book Store and Gift Shop, and several meeting rooms. The public lobby, containing four large fireplaces, offers an inviting atmosphere to dispel the chill of cool mornings and evenings.

The original unit of the Dining Hall was opened in 1953 with additions in 1956 and 1964 to increase seating capacity. Meals were originally served family-style; after major renovations, the dining hall now provides buffet-style meals with special areas for banquets, catering, etc. Extensive reorganization was done in the serving area in the spring of 1995 to provide a much-improved traffic flow.

The 650-seat chapel, first used in 1952, served for many years as the main auditorium. Major renovations were done in 1976 and 1980-81 to the patio and chapel areas, and in 1992 the Media Library was restored to classroom and exhibit space.

Holcomb Auditorium (and conference rooms), named after Dr. T. L. Holcomb, was completed in 1966. Its spire, illuminated by lights in the 150-foot tower, makes the auditorium area the focal point of the campus. Holcomb seats more than 2,800 persons. The unusual and beautiful light fixtures were made in Mexico.

Aspen Conference Building was completed in 1980, with extensive renovation taking place in 1997. The building contains an auditorium which seats 400 (can be expanded to seat 650) and several adjoining meeting rooms.

A major revitalization project began in 2000 with complete renovations to Texas Main and Chapparral Inn, along with major repairs to the recreation field and concluded when Hall of States was re-built as deluxe accommodations in 2006.

On Tuesday, Sept. 13, 2011, the trustees of LifeWay Christian Resources approved a recommendation to reduce operations at Glorieta Conference Center (Glorieta, N.M.). Effective Nov. 1, 2011, the center, will offer only summer events for student groups.

Centrifuge Camps and Collegiate Week will continue as usual.

"Significant changes in the training needs and practices of local churches, the challenges of travel to Glorieta, continued rising fuel and utility costs, an aging infrastructure, the volatile economy, and changes in state convention structures have combined to make financial viability increasingly difficult," said Jerry Rhyne, LifeWay's chief financial officer.

"As a matter of fiscal stewardship, LifeWay must be prudent controlling costs and managing resources in order to provide biblical solutions for life to individuals and churches in the most effective way," Rhyne said.

Rhyne noted that LifeWay receives no Cooperative Program funds and must operate

solely from the revenues it receives from its business operations and products. Over the years, LifeWay has been losing a substantial amount of money each year to continue the Glorieta operation. Just once in the last 25 years has Glorieta achieved financial break-even.

Trustees also provided direction to begin pursuing viable options for the disposition of the property including, but not limited to, sales to or alliances with SBC entities, state conventions and other ministries.

As a summer-only facility, Glorieta will reduce its staff from 23 to seven employees. The LifeWay Christian Store on location will also cease operation, effective Nov. 1, 2011.

"Glorieta will forever be a part of the rich heritage of LifeWay and the Southern Baptist Convention," Rhyne said. "Hundreds of thousands of children, young people and adults have experienced renewal, and thousands have met God for the first time in that majestic place in the mountains. We are grateful to the Lord for allowing us to be stewards of that history for these 60 years."