

Alma Hunt, longtime Baptist missions advocate, dead at 98

June 16, 2008

ROANOKE, Va. (ABP) — Alma Hunt, one of Baptists' best-known missions advocates, died June 14 in a Roanoke, Va., hospital. She was 98.

The Virginia native gained national recognition in 1948 when she became executive director of the Birmingham, Ala.-based Woman's Missionary Union, an auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Convention. She led WMU until her retirement in 1974.

Long-time
Virginia Baptist
missions leader
Alma Hunt at
the Woman's
Missionary
Union of
Virginia's
annual meeting
in 2007.
(Religious
Herald Photo
by Jim White)

But Hunt's influence remained profound over the next 34 years as a volunteer worker with the Baptist World Alliance, the Southern Baptist Convention's Foreign (now International) Mission Board, Global Women and numerous Virginia Baptist organizations.

Hunt "heralded the cause of missions straight from her heart," said John

Upton, executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia. “She has been a bold and influential leader not only for women, but also for all Baptists around the world.”

Born in Roanoke in 1909, Hunt grew up at First Baptist Church there and was baptized at 10. She left briefly to earn a degree at Longwood College in Farmville, Va., but returned to teach in Roanoke’s public schools. In 1943, First Baptist’s pastor, Walter Pope Binns, assumed the presidency of William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo., and the next year he asked Hunt to become the school’s dean of women. She held that post for the four years — while also earning a master’s degree in student-personnel administration at Columbia University — when she was elected WMU executive director.

During her tenure, WMU’s membership grew to an all-time high of 1.5 million and its publishing arm expanded. Hunt led the organization to help form the Baptist World Alliance’s women’s division and the North American Baptist Women’s Union, which she also served as president from 1964-67. She was vice president of the BWA from 1970-75.

After retiring in 1974, she joined the staff of the Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, Va., as an unpaid volunteer, traveling to 45 countries as a consultant for women’s mission work. She maintained a rigorous stateside schedule speaking and writing on behalf of missions.

In 1985 she returned to Roanoke — and to First Baptist Church — to care for her mother, while continuing to speak and write around the country. In 1995, she was the only woman invited as a featured speaker at the 150th anniversary celebration of the Southern Baptist Convention. “Missions is what makes me get up in the morning,” she said at the time.

In the 1990s, additional recognitions came her way with the naming of WMU’s Hunt Library and Archives and of its Alma Hunt Museum on missions education; of Hunt Hall at Virginia WMU’s retreat center; of the

Alma Hunt Cottage to house adults with developmental disabilities at HopeTree Family Services (formerly Virginia Baptist Children's Home); and of the Alma Hunt Theological Library at the John Leland Center for Theological Studies in Arlington, Va.

In 1998, Virginia Baptists' 106-year-old state missions offering was named for her.

Other honors followed. In 2001, she received the Jeter Award for denominational service from the *Religious Herald*, the Baptist General Association of Virginia's news journal. In 2002, she was inducted into the Mainstream Baptist Network Hall of Fame. In 2004, she received the Judson-Rice Award for Baptist leadership from *Baptists Today*.

In 2003, First Baptist, Roanoke, voted to sever its relationship with BGAV and affiliate with the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, a state convention formed in opposition to what it claimed was liberalism in the BGAV. Four days after the vote, Hunt joined Rosalind Hills Baptist Church. "I do not feel that I left First Baptist," Hunt said at the time of ending a nearly 94-year relationship with the church. "I feel First Baptist left me."

Last January, the congregation of Rosalind Hills asked Hunt to let them ordain her to gospel ministry — and she agreed. The ordination came about "75 years too late," said Rosalind Hills pastor Tom Stocks. "Our people wanted her to know that we appreciate the way she ministers to us and to people around the world."

Hunt, who never married, is survived by nephew, William D. Roe Jr. of Roanoke; her niece, Mary Anna Hunt of Indianapolis, Ind.; and seven great-nephews and -nieces.

Funeral services will be held at Rosalind Hills Church on Wednesday, June 18, at 10 a.m. Burial will follow in the family plot at Evergreen Cemetery in Roanoke.

The family requests that memorials be sent to WMU, SBC, 100 Missionary Ridge, Birmingham, Ala., 35242-5235; WMU of Virginia, P.O. Box 8435, Richmond, Va., 23226; or Baptist World Alliance, c/o General Fund, 405 North Washington Street, Falls Church, Va., 22046.