

# Denominational leader Jimmy Allen dies at age 91

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Jimmy R. Allen, former denominational executive and president of both the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Southern Baptist Convention, died Jan. 8 in Brunswick, Ga. He was 91.

At different stages in his ministry, Allen led the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Southern Baptist Convention's Radio & Television Commission, and he was instrumental in launching both the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and the New Baptist Covenant.



Jimmy Allen

Born in Dallas as the son of a Texas Baptist pastor, Allen earned his undergraduate degree from Howard Payne University and his doctorate at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he studied under pioneering Christian ethicist T.B. Maston.

Early in his ministry, he was a youth evangelist and student pastor, and he

served two years as state director of the Royal Ambassadors missions organization in Texas.

## **‘Tackle thorny problems head on’**

He was CLC director seven years, leading the Baptist General Convention of Texas’ moral concerns and ethics agency through the early and mid-1960s, focusing particularly on issues related to race relations. During the Johnson Administration, he was involved in the first White House Conference on Civil Rights.

William M. Pinson Jr., BGCT executive director emeritus, served on the CLC staff on a part-time basis during Allen’s time as director. Pinson recalled being “constantly amazed by his energy, visionary leadership and willingness to tackle thorny problems head on.”

“Those qualities stayed with him throughout his life,” Pinson said. “In those mid-century years, many Baptists believed that evangelism and Christian social action did not go together. Jimmy was living proof that they could.

“He was passionately evangelistic and unreservedly committed to applying the gospel to the injustices and wrongs in the world. That blending led him to deal with controversy after controversy.”

Allen was pastor of First Baptist Church in San Antonio from 1968 to 1980. The congregation grew to become the sixth-largest church in the SBC and a leader both in evangelism and community ministry.

During his tenure as pastor in San Antonio, the church launched a medical clinic, a counseling program, a program to combat hunger, three Spanish-language missions and a refugee resettlement ministry. At the same time, baptisms ranged from 225 to 558 a year.

Allen was elected BGCT president at the 1970 annual meeting in Austin and

re-elected at the Houston annual meeting in 1971.

## **‘Visionary Baptist leader’**

Suzii Paynter, former director of the Texas Baptist CLC and soon-to-retire executive coordinator of CBF, praised Allen as “a visionary Baptist leader” who “lived and spoke the truth of Christ in word, deed and creativity.”

“If you were blessed by his bigger-than-life service, you know that Jimmy revealed God’s unconditional love. He was a pastor who brought lifegiving ministry that transformed San Antonio and brought compassion to the street,” said Paynter, a San Antonio native who recently accepted a leadership role with Pastors for Texas Children.

“I have known, loved and respected Jimmy Allen all my life. My own steps in ministry have been forged by the footholds and stepping stones he laid in Texas and in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. I am so grateful for this pilgrim of faith.”

Allen served as SBC president in 1978 and 1979—the last president before the major shift in Southern Baptist life characterized by its supporters as a “conservative resurgence” and by its critics as a “fundamentalist takeover.”

As SBC president, he championed the Mission Service Corps volunteer initiative and Bold Mission Thrust, an ambitious plan to take the gospel to every person by 2000.

At the request of President Jimmy Carter, a fellow Baptist, Allen served as special consultant at the Camp David summit involving Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat, and he traveled to Iran on a fact-finding mission during the hostage crisis at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

He left the pastorate in San Antonio to become president and chief

executive officer of the Fort Worth-based SBC Radio & Television Commission, where he launched the American Cable Television System, better known as the ACTS Network.

During his decade at the Radio & Television Commission, Allen was host of a talk show, *Life Today*, and he received an Emmy Award in 1989 as producer of a documentary, *China: Walls and Bridges*.

## **Touched by tragedy**

In the 1980s, Allen's family suffered tragedy during the AIDS crisis. His daughter-in-law and two grandchildren died after contracting the virus from a tainted blood transfusion, and another grandson tested as HIV-positive. He wrote about his family's experience in *Burden of a Secret*. The third grandson died at age 13 after the book was written.

In 1990, Allen organized the Consultation of Concerned Baptists, which drew about 3,000 participants who felt disenfranchised in SBC life. After that meeting in Atlanta, Allen formed a steering committee that planned the meeting where the CBF was created. Allen went on to serve on the inaugural CBF Coordinating Council and as co-chair of the Global Missions Ministry Group.

In 2008, Allen was program chair and coordinator for the New Baptist Covenant—a movement spearheaded by Jimmy Carter to promote racial unity and reconciliation. He later was executive director emeritus of the New Baptist Covenant.

In retirement, Allen also served more than a decade as chaplain of Big Canoe Chapel, a nondenominational chapel in the mountains of north Georgia, before relocating to St. Simons Island, Ga. At the time of his death, he was a member of First Baptist Church of St. Simons Island.

