

# Texas Baptist missions leader Joy Fenner died at age 89

December 3, 2024

Joy Fenner, a Baptist missionary, Woman's Missionary Union of Texas leader and the first woman elected as president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, died Nov. 29 in Dallas. She was 89.

Fenner served two decades as executive director-treasurer of WMU of Texas and was named executive director-treasurer emeritus after her retirement. She was elected president of WMU of Texas in 2009.

"Possessing sterling qualities, such as a deep devotion to Christ and his Great Commission, imaginative creativity, thoughtfulness and a cooperative team spirit, enabled her to lead the Texas WMU productively," said William M. Pinson Jr., who served alongside Fenner during his time as BGCT executive director.

Joy Phillips Fenner was born March 3, 1935, in Avinger to Samuel and Beulah Mae Phillips and grew up in East Texas. She attended Paris Junior College and what was then East Texas Baptist College.

She was secretary at First Baptist Church in Marshall before she joined the staff of Texas WMU to serve as state director of the Girl's Auxiliary, now known as Girls in Action, from 1959 to 1966.



Joy Fenner (2nd from right) and Texas WMU President Gloria Mills (right) are pictured in this 2010 photo with former presidents (left to right) Amelia “Millie” Bishop, Gerry Dunkin, Mary Humphries, Jeane Law, Kathy Hillman, Nelda Taylor (now Hoffman) and Paula Jeser. (File Photo by Kathy Hillman)

Kathy Hillman, who served as president both of Texas WMU and the BGCT, noted she was a GA when Fenner was state director of the program. So, she sometimes joked that she was “a Joy Phillips GA.”

“Later, she referred to me as her first Joy Phillips Fenner GA Texas WMU president, which I assume was true. At least she claimed me,” Hillman said.

“Through the years, many of us had the wonderful privilege of working with Joy and count her as a wise mentor, consistent encourager and dear friend.”

Joy and Charlie Fenner married on Oct. 8, 1966, and they served together as Southern Baptist missionaries in Fukuoka, Japan, until 1980.

Carolyn Porterfield—who served in a variety of roles with Texas WMU—first met the Fenners when they were in Fukuoka and she was a

missionary Journeyman based in Kyoto.

“Who could imagine that years later, Joy would invite me to join her staff at WMU of Texas?” Porterfield asked.

“Joy taught me much about missions and being a woman in leadership in Baptist life, which is not always welcomed or easy. At some point, she became more than my boss, but also my friend.”

## **Executive leader of Texas WMU for two decades**

Soon after the Fenners returned to Texas, Joy Fenner became executive director-treasurer of Texas WMU in January 1981.

“Her experience serving on a church staff, then as a member of the Texas WMU staff, and then as a missionary in Japan prepared her in special ways for the role she filled successfully as the executive leader of the WMU of Texas,” Pinson said.

“Leading a highly skilled, hard-working staff in praying for God’s guidance and laboring to follow his direction, she advanced the missionary endeavors of Baptists.”

As chief executive of Texas WMU, Fenner was a key leader in raising funds to start new churches as part of the Mission Texas emphasis. That included the “triple-triple” campaign for the Mary Hill Davis Offering for State Missions, challenging churches to triple one year’s offering and then triple it again the next year.

Fenner also was instrumental in developing the WorldTouch and Touch Tomorrow Today endowments to support mission work through Texas WMU.

Soon after she retired from Texas WMU, she served as interim executive director of Tennessee WMU from 2001 to 2003.

## **First woman elected as BGCT president**

Messengers to the 2007 BGCT annual meeting in Amarillo elected Fenner as president of the state convention. She served previously as BGCT second vice president and then first vice president.



Joy Fenner was the first woman elected as president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. (File Photo)

BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade served with Fenner first when she was executive director-treasurer of Texas WMU and later when she was a BGCT officer.

When Wade expanded the executive director's leadership council to include the top executive leaders of Texas WMU and Texas Baptist Men, Fenner was the first woman to serve on that council, where she offered "valued

input” and thoughtful counsel, he said.

In all her leadership roles, she “raised the level of any conversation” in which she participated, he said.

“Joy Fenner had a clear-eyed view of what it meant to be a Baptist on mission,” Wade said. “She encouraged, called out, challenged and led by example.”

Fenner was a longtime member of Gaston Oaks Baptist Church in Dallas and served on the board of the Gaston Christian Center.

At various times, she served on the board of trustees of East Texas Baptist University and the boards of the WMU Foundation, Baylor University’s School of Social Work and Healing Hands Ministries.



Joy Fenner received the Texas Baptist Elder Statesman Award at Independence Baptist Church. (File Photo)

She received honorary doctorates from ETBU and the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor and was named an honorary alumnus of Baylor’s Truett Theological Seminary.

She was named a Texas Baptist Elder Statesman, and she received the Pioneer Award for Service from the Texas Baptist Missions Foundation and the George W. Truett Distinguished Church Service Award from the Baylor Alumni Association.

She was preceded in death by her husband of 50 years, Charlie, in 2017. She will be buried alongside him at the Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery at a date to be determined.

A memorial service is scheduled at Gaston Oaks Baptist Church at 1 p.m. on Dec. 19. A reception will follow the service. Memorial gifts can be made to the Gaston Christian Center, c/o Nataly Sorenson, 8515 Greenville Ave., Dallas TX 75243.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The article originally was posted Tuesday morning, Dec. 3. The last paragraph was revised later that afternoon after arrangements for the memorial service were finalized.*