

# Before 1984

1984 MARKS THE DATE 25 YEARS AGO that Baptists for Life was officially organized and began incorporation proceedings, but it doesn't tell the whole story. We'd be wrong not to recognize what happened well before that date.



Mary Jayne Borrello  
BFL founder

In 1982, Mary Jayne Borrello began paying attention to what was going on as a result of the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision eleven years earlier. Up until that time, she'd been a busy wife

and mother and heavily involved in her church in Grand Rapids. Now her children were grown and she had time to devote to other interests.

Born and raised a Baptist, she knew right from wrong. Her understanding that abortion is murder grew out of her convictions concerning the authority of Scripture, convictions shared by people in her church. She wondered, "Why haven't I heard anyone preach about abortion? They've been killing babies for more than ten years!" To her, it seemed strange that people of sound doctrine – who faithfully uphold the sanctity of human life, believing human beings are created in God's image – were doing nothing about it.

Anyone who knows Mary Jayne knows she's not content to let things lie. She called area pastors and other Christian friends to find out why there hadn't a response from Baptists. "We, of all people, should have been saying something."

She soon identified various reasons for inaction. Some deemed abortion an unfit topic for churches to handle.

Others viewed it as just one of many evils confronting Christians, as "too political" or "too Catholic." But a more insidious reason emerged. Abortion was becoming entrenched, even in Christian circles, as a convenient escape from reality.

Becoming involved with Michigan Right to Life, Mary Jayne was soon named President of the Education Committee, which gave her opportunities to meet more people and speak in churches. She was shocked to learn that some believers approved of abortions for rape and incest. And, while church people were generally opposed to abortion, little did they know that their daughters were showing up at local abortion clinics – as attested to by sidewalk counselors and picketers who detected Baptist college bumper stickers on cars in clinic parking lots. Young women also confided to her that their church-going parents were forcing them to abort in order to preserve reputations.

Disheartened but not discouraged, she formulated a four-week training seminar to be held at area Baptist churches. Good News Baptist Church was the first, and then Middleville. She recruited speakers such as then-probate judge Randall Hekman and a few others to lecture on abortion history, laws, statistics, methods, what the Bible teaches, and so on. She developed a mailing list and began sending out prayer letters. Soon the question started coming back: What can we do about abortion?

**B**APTISTS FOR LIFE WAS BORN. Actually, Mary Jayne had begun using that name early on. In February of 1983, she set up a display at the annual Baptist College Bible Conference with an

## Tracing the history of Baptists & abortion

*In 1968, the American Baptist Convention meeting in Boston adopted a statement on abortion that attempted to balance the freedom of individuals and the sanctity of human life, but essentially came down in favor of abortion rights. It allowed for "the termination of a pregnancy prior to the end of the 12th week" upon request; after 12 weeks, it stipulated that abortions should be done by a physician in a hospital upon the request of the mother for reasons of her physical or mental health, physical or mental defect of the "conceptus," and when there was proof the pregnancy resulted from rape or incest. This, they felt, would help churches lead "the populace . . . toward an enlightened view of this provocative problem."*

*The 1969 Baptist General Convention of Texas complained that changes in abortion laws had been delayed, that this amounted to "infringement of personal liberty," and that people were being "denied the benefit of best medical judgment and practice by a statute based primarily on a 19th Century dogma."*

*The position of this state association is significant since Texas would be the setting for the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court case. Today, the Texas BGC tries to stake out a moderate, if muddled, middle ground: "No statement on abortion can either resolve the complexities or please all, or even most, proponents of opposing views."*

*The national Baptist General Conference has historically been*

**Continued next page**

early logo. She hoped the nascent organization would equip Baptists with knowledge so they could speak out, vote appropriately, and help women with unplanned pregnancies. This latter point was important because the opposition liked to criticize pro-life people as only being concerned about the baby *before* birth. We could take away a powerful argument by caring for women and offering them alternatives to abortion.

These early efforts saved lives. One daughter of Baptist missionaries was on her way into an abortion



clinic when picketers gave her a pamphlet on the various stages of fetal development, and she changed her mind. (A few years later, her little boy wound up in a junior church class led by Mary Jayne.) A pregnant teenager sat through the four-week seminar and decided to release her baby for adoption, even though her parents advocated abortion.

**E**VENTUALLY, A BOARD WAS FORMED, an office established, and incorporation papers filed with the State of Michigan. Donations began coming in, a director (Mark Blocher) was hired, and volunteers were trained. Churches began hosting BFL speakers, groups formed state chapters, and pregnancy care centers opened. Brochures and newsletters were published, conferences were held, and a web site was launched. From there, pro-life ministry worked its way around the globe.

To say that a lot has changed from the beginning of BFL until now would be an understatement. Thanks to Baptists for Life and other pro-life groups, church people are more knowledgeable about abortion, careful about their voting habits, and involved in pro-life ministries. Churches regularly commemorate Sanctity of Human Life

Sunday, and it's normal for pastors to preach about abortion. But it didn't happen without struggle and the tireless efforts of many unsung people beside Mary Jayne, such as Lois, Luke, and Nancy Wilson, Mike and Debbie Gommerson, David Egner, Don Wyrzten, and Dan VanderLugt. BFL stands on their shoulders and is grateful.

## 1984 and beyond

In January or February of 1984, Mary Jayne and a few others reserved a banquet room at the old Bylsma's Restaurant on Leonard St. in Grand Rapids. They announced an "informational meeting" in church bulletins and hoped people would show up. A handful did.

During that meeting, *pro tem* officers were named. With that order of business in place, funds could be collected, and members recruited. In July of that year, at a rally at Northpointe Christian High School (then-Grand Rapids Baptist Academy), board members were elected.

The next order of business was the establishment of the Crisis Pregnancy Center of Greater Grand Rapids (now Alpha Women's Center). The idea was that it would serve as a model for similar ministries in other cities. The first volunteer training seminar was held in March of 1985, and on May 13 the CPC opened its doors to clients.

From the very beginning, BFL published a newsletter called *Lifelines*. It ceased publication in 2001 with the advent of a copy-ready bulletin insert called *Life Matters* that is sent to churches three times a year. Every year since 1986, BFL has produced a four-color bulletin insert for Sanctity of Human Life Sunday.

Before long, BFL had "chapters" in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Iowa, Minnesota, New York, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Indiana, as well as other Michigan cities. In October of 1989, we hosted our first

## Tracing the history of Baptists & abortion

continued

*willing to come down on the side of life. A resolution adopted in 1971 said "we ought always to be governed by our awareness of the sacredness of life" and "we as Christians ought not regard abortion as a means of evading individual responsibility." In 1981, after a statement opposing abortion, they called on members "to influence public opinion in this regard."*

*The Southern Baptist Convention had to undergo a significant battle before arriving at its present pro-life position. In 1971, acknowledging a divided constituency, the SBC adopted a resolution similar to that of the American Baptists. A few years later, they reaffirmed that stance, but also resolved to "continue to seek God's guidance through prayer and study in order to bring about solutions."*

*By 1976, the tide began to turn. The tone of the SBC resolution that year is decidedly less equivocal, declaring at the outset that "abortion is a very serious moral and spiritual problem" and reaffirming "the biblical sacredness and dignity of all human life, including fetal," yet it held out the possibility of "therapeutic" abortion and called for a limited role for government. Harsh terms are reserved for "birth control" abortions: "The practice of abortion for selfish non-therapeutic reasons wantonly destroys fetal life, dulls our society's moral sensitivity, and leads to a cheapening of all human life."*

*An SBC resolution of 1982 called for a constitutional amendment to abolish most abortions (except those done to preserve a mother's life) and for an end to tax-funded abortions.*

**Continued next page**

“leadership summit” with representatives of the various state or regional groups gathered around a table.

Several chapters formed pregnancy care or maternity resource centers. In 1990, the BFL family of centers served over 8,300 women, with 72 praying to receive Christ. By the mid-1990s, Leadership Summits had become an annual event in July for PCC personnel, hosted primarily in Grand Rapids, but also in Pennsylvania, Missouri, and Texas.

In October of 1991, BFL purchased an ultrasound machine for one of our associated PCCs. Many similar purchases and donations followed, and for a time we operated a program called Life Images to facilitate this facet of the ministry.

In 1996, Baptists for Life made its debut on the world wide web. This

brought us inquiries from all parts of the world, and we began serving the needs of pro-life people in Europe, Africa, South America, and Asia. We participated in our first international conference in Romania in 2000.

In 1998, BFL began partnering with mission agencies to train missionaries for pro-life ministry on the foreign field. By 1999, the New Life Prenatal Center – founded by missionary Evelyn Stone in Lima, Peru – proved that PCCs could work effectively alongside church-planting efforts. An international conference was held in Peru in 2002, with BFL involvement; these have become biennial events for centers in South America.

Evelyn and her husband Dave became International Training consultants for BFL – traveling the globe on

our behalf. So far they’ve been to India (2003), the Philippines (2005), and Liberia and Kenya (2006).

In 1999, BFL conducted the first training seminar for the respite-care program called LIFT at Calvary Baptist Church in Grand Rapids. This ministry is designed to provide a Christian response to euthanasia and assisted suicide. We hosted our first LIFT Caregiver Summit at Grandville Bible Church in 2008.

In 2009, BFL launched three blogs: the Pro-Life Pastors’ Corner, the PCC List, and LIFT List. The latter two grew out of email newsletters.

The story is still being written.

*For additional historical timelines, see BFL Though the Years (<http://bfl.org/Files/25years.pdf>) and 20 Years of Pro-Life Ministry (<http://bfl.org/documents/LifeMatters41print.pdf>).*

## Tracing the history of Baptists & abortion, continued

*It should be noted that an underlying theme of many of these resolutions is concern for women and an acknowledgement that Christian people should extend helping hands. In 1971, the Baptist General Convention said, “The Christian community should respond in sympathetic understanding to the individuals immediately involved, whatever action is taken in regard to abortion.” The SBC, in 1976, said, “we . . . support the right of expectant mothers to the full range of medical services and personal counseling for the preservation of life and health.”*

*The same year (1984) that Baptists for Life (BFL) formed in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a group of Southern Baptists for Life (SBL) organized in Texas to “work for and witness to the biblical view of the sanctity of human life . . . and to encourage the church and society to embody those biblical truths.” SBL had been working for nearly ten years in reaction to Roe and succeeded in bringing the convention around to a pro-life stance and in establishing Sanctity of [Human] Life Sunday on the SBC denominational calendar. The two Baptist pro-life groups operated separately, largely unaware of the other. SBL dissolved in 1991, its pro-life advocacy and ministry having been taken over by other entities within the SBC.*

*Baptist for Life, thankfully, did not need to turn the hearts and minds of the General Association of Regular Baptists toward life, since the group with which it is most*

*closely associated already held and maintained firm pro-life convictions. As early as 1971, the messengers of the churches at the annual association meeting in Winona Lake, Indiana, went on record opposing abortion and calling on state governments to “soberly reflect on the consequences of legitimizing the murder of the yet unborn.”*

*In July of 1973, six months after the Roe v. Wade decision was handed down, the GARBC voted to “openly declare that murder is murder even if it is called ‘legalized abortion.’” Five years later they addressed the issue again, asking Congress and the states to ratify a human life amendment to the Constitution. In 1985, the messengers unanimously adopted a resolution deploring abortion and euthanasia, and commending “those approved agencies that provide an alternative to abortion and care for the elderly,” which would have included the newly formed Baptists for Life.*

*More GARBC resolutions followed in subsequent years, commenting on a Christian’s voting responsibilities, euthanasia, chemical abortions, fetal tissue research, assisted suicide, and reproductive technology. The statement on partial birth abortion in 1996 resolved to “encourage our fellowshipping churches to consider biblically sound, evangelistic outreaches that counsel women, tempted by abortion, to choose life for their pre-born children and provide practical support, compassion and encouragement with the goal of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ – the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” This aligns exactly with BFL’s goals and mission.*