

95 YEARS DEVELOPING BELIEVERS

“We are ambassadors for Christ.” 2 Corinthians 5:20

This verse of Scripture, adopted as the Royal Ambassador motto, capsules the 95-year history of Royal Ambassadors.

The Royal Ambassador organization grew out of a need for Southern Baptist boys to learn that they are commissioned as Christ’s ambassadors to go into the world and tell the story of Jesus Christ. It is an organization that grew through enthusiasm for missions and the need of belonging to a group of other young Christian ambassadors. Today, 2.16 million boys have participated in Royal Ambassadors since its inception in 1908; and in the last ten years alone, a quarter million young boys have learned to live out the RA pledge.

As early as 1883, a group of boys between 12 and 14 years of age began a missionary organization in Owensboro, Kentucky. They met regularly with their pastor to study missions and collected money to help support a young girl in Miss Lottie Moon’s school in Tengchow, China. Groups of boys in other sections of the country also became interested in missions during the 1890s and into the early years of the Twentieth Century.

But it was Miss Fannie Heck, an active member of the Woman’s Missionary Union, who was particularly challenged by the possibility of boys united for the sake of missions. She began to make definite plans for the organization, and in October 1907, a “Committee On Mission Work for Boys” was appointed by the Woman’s Missionary Union with Miss Heck as chairman. In May 1908, Woman’s Missionary Union adopted the recommendations of the committee and began promoting a boy’s missionary organization. It was known as *The Order of Royal Ambassadors* and included in its membership boys aged 9 through 16. The first chapter of Royal Ambassadors organized after the 1908 meeting in Goldsboro, North Carolina.

By 1915, there were 500 Royal Ambassador chapters with roughly 4500 members. Ten years later, the number of chapters had grown to 1,500 with a membership of 14,500.

The first statewide Royal Ambassador meeting was held in October 1924, on the campus of Ouachita Baptist Church in Arkadelphia, Arkansas. It was during this same year that the original ranking system for Royal Ambassadors was developed.

By 1935, there were 4,500 Royal Ambassador chapters in the Southern Baptist Convention. Camping was becoming a valuable part of the Royal Ambassador experience. Statewide RA camps were held in at least nine states in 1936.

As the work grew, Woman's Missionary Union leaders realized the importance of securing the help of men to lead Royal Ambassadors. In 1940, the WMU of Alabama employed J. Ivyloy Bishop to promote RA work in that state during the summer. The next summer he divided his time between Alabama and Mississippi. This set the stage for his eventual employment in 1943 as the first convention-wide Royal Ambassador secretary.

Immediately, interest in Royal Ambassador work soared. The first Young Men's Mission conference was held at Ridgecrest, North Carolina, in 1944. *Ambassador Life*, a monthly publication for Royal Ambassadors and their leaders, was established in June of 1946.

At the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Houston, Texas, in 1953, it was recommended that a committee study the possibility of transferring Royal Ambassador work, ages 4th through 12th grade only, from the WMU to Brotherhood sponsorship (1st, 2nd and 3rd grade age levels would follow in the 1960s). The next year the committee proposed the transfer of Royal Ambassadors to the Brotherhood Commission to be consummated at the end of a three-year period. It was approved. In 1954, the Royal Ambassador organization started its transfer to the Brotherhood Commission.

Under the Brotherhood Commission's sponsorship, the Royal Ambassador organization saw explosive growth in the latter years of 1950, with the growth explosion continuing into the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. It was during this time that Royal Ambassadors saw its highest enrollment, as well as the expansion of materials into each individual age group, matching the growth of enrollment. Extensive development of sports and campcrafts was also undertaken during this time.

In 1997, sponsorship of the Royal Ambassador organization was transferred once again when the Home Mission Board, Brotherhood Commission, and Radio and Television Commission merged to become one agency, the North American Mission Board. Under North American Mission Board sponsorship, the Royal Ambassador organization took on a more directed purpose toward missions and individual mission accountability, building upon the foundation previously laid with the rich Royal Ambassador heritage.

Much has changed in the 95 years since Royal Ambassadors began their journey; but the foundation upon which the organization was built remains solid to this day. Young boys are still being taught that they are commissioned as Christ's ambassadors to go into the world and tell the story of Jesus Christ. They are still being encouraged to find their unique place in God's mission of taking the gospel to the world. After nearly a century of shaping millions of Christian young men into Ambassadors for Christ, and with groups in 14 countries world-wide, Royal Ambassadors is an international organization reaching the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.