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By George Henson

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LANCASTER—Lois Hitt Gilmer has been playing the piano at First Baptist Church in Lancaster more than 50 years, with no plans to retire. And Minister of Music Chett Haynes couldn't be happier to hear it.

"Sometimes I'll say to someone, 'Our pianist has been here 50 years,' and they'll say, 'I'm sorry.' But this really isn't that kind of situation at all," Haynes said. "We are so blessed, because not only does she have a marvelous talent and ability, but also a servant's heart. It is our pleasure to enjoy her ministry."

Gilmer's flexibility impresses Pastor Charles Dixon. When the church's worship style moved from traditional hymns to a blended approach of hymns and contemporary music, she made the transition without any problem, he noted.



Pianists Nielsen and Young perform at a celebration marking Gilmer's 50th anniversary as church pianist.

"Some people who do something at a high level of proficiency for such a long time aren't as open to change as she is. She's very versatile," Dixon said.

"She embraces the new but also enjoys the traditional," Haynes added, noting her skill level makes such versatility possible.

"She doesn't miss a lick. She's at the top of her game."

Gilmer still enjoys serving as church pianist as much today as when she began at age 13, playing the piano at First Baptist Church of Memphis in rural West Texas.

When she became pianist at First Baptist Church of Lancaster in 1955, she never thought about the possibility of having the same role five decades.

"It's just something that I love. I feel like it's what the Lord wants me to do," she said. She has no idea how many worship services, re-hearsals, weddings and funerals she has played for, but "I wish I did," she added.

Playing the piano at church more than half a century never was a goal she or anyone else set. "It was just always understood that I would play as long as I could do it," Gilmer said.

She has lost count of the number of pastors and ministers of music with whom she has served but is glad to be working with Haynes. "I hope I continue for awhile longer, because he is such a friend and inspiration," she said.

The church honored Gilmer earlier this year by inviting internationally renowned pianists Nielsen and Young to play at a celebration marking her 50th anniversary and inviting her to perform with them.

"She is so good that as pleased as she was to play with them, I think they were just as proud to play with her," Haynes said.

Gilmer saw the 50-year mark as a milepost, not a finish line.

"I feel like I would feel really miserable to be sitting in the congregation; I've been doing this so long," she said. "Also, I think as long as you are doing what you know is the Lord's will, it keeps your mind active."

That calling may be what keeps her going strong. "Some days my fingers are so stiff and they hurt, but when the service starts, I always forget about any pain, and the stiffness just fades away," she said.

As for Haynes, he's glad each Sunday to look over and see her sitting at her normal spot on the piano bench.

"It's unusual to find someone who has been doing it this long, and the church is still thrilled," he said. "We pray for her to have a long, healthy life. She can still crank it out."

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