

DOWN HOME: Phil Strickland: Friend & guide

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Many of us—God only knows the number, but it is huge—lost a friend who felt more like a brother last week.

Although his spirit remained strong and effervescent until the end, Phil Strickland finally lost his longtime battle with cancer.

As I write these words of love and grief, I realize countless others could write them, too. Phil made an intensely personal, unique and Christlike mark on our lives.

For the past decade, I looked to Phil as folks look to an older brother. We actually met about a quarter-century ago, but we became fast friends after I arrived back home in Texas just over 10 years ago.

By then, Phil had worked at the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission almost 30 years. He knew this state inside-out. Since I'd been away almost 20 years, he helped me reorient myself to the Texas landscape. I've done my job at the Standard better because Phil helped me understand Texas Baptist nuances.

But all that, important as it is, seemed beside the point. With Phil, the point was we had a chance to share an amazing journey to which Christ had

called us. We had an opportunity and responsibility to channel our gifts and blessings and time and talent to make this state we loved a better place by making it a more gracious place for the weakest members of our society.

Sometimes, Phil turned his prodigious energy and resources to strengthening just one Christian brother—me.

If you've paid attention to Baptist happenings during the past decade, you know we've been through hard times. And editing a Baptist newspaper through these years of difficulty hasn't always been a fun-and-fulfilling calling. Many times, it plain hurt.

Phil seemed to have a radar for my pain and knew when to reach out. I don't hunt, so Phil and I didn't spend time on a deer lease, as others did. But Phil and I both liked breakfast, and we spent time together eating pancakes and drinking coffee. And I spent time listening to Phil's stories and thinking about his dreams for Texas Baptists—traditional, mainstream, progressive Christians, free from dominion and empowered to do God's work and follow God's path, wherever that leads.

Phil never exactly said, "Don't quit; don't give up." But he kept me going. He kept me going by smiling and laughing and working hard in the face of cancer. By casting vision for a day he never would see. By believing I could do the job God called me to do, letting me know he was proud of me, cared for me, pulled alongside me.

I almost didn't tell you this, because I don't want you to think that I think I had a "special" relationship with Phil. That's what's so amazing—I am legion. Hundreds of Phil's friends can tell similar tales. He wasn't a large man, but his love was big enough to embrace us all.

Imagine this: Heaven is a more energetic, purposeful place. Phil has arrived. And we who share his legacy continue here with purpose and conviction. Phil showed us how.

Marv Knox

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.