

# Obituary: Joe Paul Whitten

September 23, 2021

**Joe Paul Whitten** of Big Spring, longtime Texas Baptist church musician and leader in prison ministry, died Sept. 20. He was 91. He was born May 30, 1930, in Muskogee, Okla. He graduated from Muskogee Central High School, and he married Virginia Lee Worrell, also from Muskogee. She died in 2002. Later, he met Ming Suie Lee of Big Spring, and they married in 2005. He earned an undergraduate degree in music from West Texas State University and a master's degree in vocal performance from Texas Tech University. For more than 30 years, he directed music at churches throughout Texas, including in Lubbock, Pampa, Fort Worth, Tulia, Levelland and Big Spring. He also taught in the Howard College choral department for four years. In 1973, Whitten began taking his church's youth choir on visits to Texas prisons. In 1984, he founded Joe Whitten Prison Ministries. For more than 20 years, he toured the country with His Children, a choral ensemble of college-age volunteers. The group ministered to tens of thousands of inmates in both state and federal prisons. His group was the first allowed to perform at the Mountain View Unit in Gatesville, and it was the first to sing and witness on Oklahoma's death row, as well as Soledad and San Quentin prisons in California. The American Correctional Association invited His Children to perform multiple times at their annual congresses, and the association recognized Whitten with a volunteer award for special services to prisons. Whitten was a longtime member of the Centurymen, an auditioned men's chorus of professional church musicians from across the United States. He accompanied the Centurymen on several international tours, including performances in England, Scotland, Wales, Canada and China. His final



public ensemble performance was with the Singing Men of West Texas at New York's Carnegie Hall in 2018. He was preceded in death by his first wife, Virginia Worrell Whitten of Muskogee, Okla.; two sisters, Loretta Rosser of Long Beach, Calif., and Helen Stith of Broken Arrow, Okla.; three brothers, Jack Whitten Jr. of Muskogee, Okla., Jerry Whitten of Pampa and Phil Whitten of Fort Smith, Ark. He is survived by his wife, Ming Suie Whitten of Big Spring; son David Whitten and his wife Marcia of Waco; daughter Marta Prentice of Hale Center; stepson U.S. Army Col. Steven Meek and wife Hayley of Harker Heights; and grandson Aaron Prentice of Lubbock. Visitation is scheduled from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. Sept. 24 at Nalley-Pickle & Welch Funeral Home in Big Spring. Funeral services will be held at 10 a.m. on Sept. 25 at First Baptist Church in Big Spring. The family suggests memorials to First Baptist Church of Big Spring, earmarked for missions or music funds.