

CommonCall: Pastor to a community for four decades

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VANDERBILT—Technically, Jack Hutson has been pastor of Vanderbilt Baptist Church the past 40 years.

But ask anybody in the unincorporated Jackson County community of about 400 residents, and they will say he has spent four decades as pastor to the whole town and the Industrial Independent School District.

Colleen Sprinks Rozsypal was a member of the Presbyterian Church in Vanderbilt until it finally disbanded a few years ago. Her husband grew up in the Catholic Church. But a common denominator marked every major event in the lives of their family—hospital stays due to car wrecks or illness, births, weddings and funerals.

“Jack and Katrina Hutson have always been there,” she said.

In fact, one of her daughter’s even paid the Baptist pastor the highest imaginable compliment.

“She named her first dog Jack Hutson,” Rozsypal said.

Called to return to South Texas

Hutson grew up in a small church in Van Vleck, about an hour’s drive east of Vanderbilt. He served on church staffs in Bay City, Groom and Amarillo before he returned to South Texas in August 1979 to preach in view of a call at Vanderbilt Baptist Church. He received the call several weeks later—a phone call from the chair of the search committee inviting him to become the church’s pastor.



Pastor Jack Hutson wants everyone in and around his Jackson County community to know regardless whether they attend his church—or any church—they are welcome and loved. (Photo / Ken Camp)

“I would have gone to Siberia if that’s where the Lord led—and I hate the cold,” Hutson said.

Vanderbilt Baptist averaged 19 in attendance when the Hutsons arrived. On a typical Sunday in recent months, between 70 and 80 worshippers gather for worship. About 120 attended the church’s 80th anniversary celebration in November.

A week or so later, church members gathered to pack 1,000 gift boxes for Operation Christmas Child, a ministry of Samaritan’s Purse.

“Our church is known for being generous and helping people,” Hutson said.

Reaching children, ministering to families

The first summer after the Hutsons moved to Vanderbilt, Katrina reinstated Vacation Bible School at the church after a long hiatus. More than 40 children attended that summer. Every summer since then, the church has continued to offer VBS, often drawing up to 150 children from the communities the consolidated school district serves—Vanderbilt, Lolita, Inez, LeWard, La Salle and Francitas.

As many as 88 youth attend Wednesday evening activities at the church,

filling every available classroom. They include the children of parents who first met Jack Hutson when he supplemented his church income by driving a school bus.

For a time, Hutson served Vanderbilt Baptist Church bivocationally—first working at a DuPont plant in Victoria and later working as a substitute school teacher and lifeguard.

For 25 years, he also was Baptist Student Union director at Victoria College. He pointed out the church graciously allowed him the necessary time to minister to the students, including trips to student week at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center.

“The church has always done everything it could to take care of us,” he said.

Late-night calls? No problem

And local residents—regardless whether they are members of Vanderbilt Baptist Church—noted the Hutsons always have done everything possible to take care of them.



A former superintendent of the Industrial Independent School District said regarding Pastor Jack Hutson: “We’d all be so much better off if we had about a hundred Jack Hutsons.” (Photo / Ken Camp)

Jerald Jimerson—former teacher and principal and eventually superintendent of the Industrial Independent School District—recalled late-night emergencies when he knew he could drop off his daughter at the

Hutsons' house, no matter the time.

"We'd all be so much better off if we had about a hundred Jack Hutsons," Jimerson said.

Others tell similar stories illustrating how the Hutsons' home always was open to anyone, regardless of the hour.

"We've just tried to make ourselves available to whoever needs us," Katrina Hutson said. "God always gave us the opportunities to minister."

The Hutsons' daughter, Holly Rose, described how her parents "poured themselves into the community" investing in the lives of neighbors across generations, she noted.

"My dad can't go anywhere—not just in Vanderbilt but anywhere—without running into somebody he knows," she said. "If he doesn't know them yet, he will. When he walks into a room and sees somebody by himself, he will go speak to him. He doesn't want anyone to feel alone."

'Never met a stranger'

Gary Thedford, the volunteer music director at Lolita Baptist Church who worked as a schoolteacher and principal, likewise emphasized Hutson's outgoing personality and genuine interest in others.

"He never meets a stranger," Thedford said. "He's just a people person."



Jack Hutson regularly attends Industrial Independent School District sporting events and seldom has missed any home games over the last four decades. (Photo /Ken

Camp)

Hutson regularly attends school sporting events and seldom has missed any home games over the last four decades, Thedford noted.

“Going to the football games and basketball games offers great opportunities to minister to people,” Hutson explained. “When people who don’t go to church see me in the stands at a football game, at least they say, ‘If I need a minister, I know who he is.’”

Given Hutson’s people skills, Thedford marveled that a larger church in a larger city hasn’t succeeded in wooing him as their pastor.

“I’m sure he’s probably had opportunities to move to a bigger church through the years, but he’s felt a real commitment to the small church in a small community,” Thedford said.

No regrets

Hutson acknowledged he has been approached by other churches in the course of four decades. Once, he even preached in view of a call at a larger church in Oklahoma.

“It was pretty attractive, but it just didn’t feel right,” he recalled. “It’s so good right here, and it’s not like I needed to make a move. So, I told the Lord, ‘If you really want me to go, it’s going to have to be a unanimous vote.’”

When the votes were tallied at the Oklahoma church, members there overwhelmingly expressed their desire for Hutson to become their pastor—except for one vote in opposition.

“So, I came right back to Vanderbilt,” Hutson said. “I wonder sometimes if we’re doing all the other day-to-day things to be obedient to the Lord, when

it comes to the big decisions, maybe God says, 'I'm going to let you make the call this time.' Anyway, I don't have any regrets."

Ministering across generations

One of the benefits of serving 40 years in the same town is ministering to multiple generations of families and seeing children who grew up in the congregation become mature Christians, he noted.

Mark James attended Vanderbilt Baptist Church as a child and a teenager. He has been a deacon and the church's volunteer worship leader the last 10 years.

"If I wasn't born there, it was right after that I started attending," James said. Even during some of his early childhood years when his family lived in Houston, they spent weekends with his grandmother in Vanderbilt, he noted.

He described Hutson as a friend and mentor and as his "go-to person" when he needs spiritual guidance.

"When I get stuck reading the Bible, I can text him at 6 in the morning to ask him a question," James said.

'Tag-team' funerals with other ministers

Because of the Hutsons' long-term commitment to the community, several Vanderbilt residents and former residents noted how often families with ties to other churches—or no church—have asked him to preach loved ones' funerals.

In the predominantly Catholic community, he often has conducted “tag-team” funerals with the local parish priest, some said.

“I have had good relationships with the priests here,” Hutson said. “We may not agree on theology, but we can still be friends.”

Hutson praises Vanderbilt Baptist Church for its willingness to make changes over time and try new approaches.

“Now, we don’t have a fog machine, and I don’t descend out of the ceiling to deliver the sermon,” he said, joking. But the church did install video screens in the sanctuary and adopt a blended worship format, he added.

“The church has never been opposed to anything that would promote the gospel,” he said. “When I have suggested things along the way, the church has never once said ‘no.’ It’s always been, ‘Let’s give it a shot.’”

At a time in life when some ministers might be ready to slow down, Hutson continues to look to the future. After a period of steady and consistent growth, Vanderbilt Baptist Church is making plans to build educational space and an activity center on donated land adjacent to its facility.

“I could retire, but I don’t know that I want to anytime soon. I’m having too much fun,” he said. “When God wants me to step aside, I’ll do it. But I’m not ready to be a greeter at Walmart just yet.”

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