

Former Waco youth group reunites after 50 years

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When former members of the youth group at Highland Baptist Church in Waco gathered for a recent reunion, old friends “picked up conversations where they left off” 50 years ago, Jimmy Dorrell said.

Dorrell, pastor of the Church Under the Bridge and president emeritus of Mission Waco, served as youth director at Highland Baptist Church from 1969 to 1974.

In the years that followed, he stayed in contact with about a dozen of the former youth—officiating at their weddings and conducting the funerals of some of their parents.

So, when Highland Baptist announced plans for its May 7 100th anniversary celebration, Dorrell wanted to reconnect with former members of his youth group who might return to Waco for the church event.

“I expected 15 or so,” he said. “We had 44 of the old youth group attend, along with nine spouses.”

Eight came from states outside of Texas, including three from California, he noted.



Members of the youth group at Waco's Highland Baptist Church in the early 1970s gathered for a reunion at Cameron Park. (Courtesy Photo)

"It was an incredible weekend," Dorrell said.

In addition to sharing meals at local restaurants and spending most of the day together on Saturday at Cameron Park, members of the former youth choir at Highland Baptist sang during a Sunday morning Church Under the Bridge worship service beneath the I-35 overpass at 4th Street.

Close-knit members of the former youth group honestly talked with each other about the struggles some have faced through the decades—divorces, serious health issues and even a suicide attempt, he noted. They also testified to God's faithfulness and gave thanks for precious memories.

Most meaningful memories identified

Fourteen completed a survey in which Dorrell asked them to identify their most meaningful memories of their time in the youth group at Highland Baptist.



Members of the Highland Baptist Church youth group in the 1970s enjoyed summer camp at Falls Creek in Oklahoma. (Courtesy

Photo)

Some mentioned coming to faith and being baptized, learning more about God, enjoying fellowship together, experiencing summer camp at Falls Creek Youth Camp in Oklahoma and participating in youth choir.

Several also mentioned something close to Dorrell's heart—ministry in Waco's "No Man's Land," an impoverished unincorporated area between Waco and Bellmead. Working under the direction of Pastor Dewey Pinkney at St. Mary's Missionary Baptist Church, the predominantly white youth group led Vacation Bible School for children in the mostly Black community.

"It was a transformational experience for me, and I was glad to find out it was an important part of their lives," said Dorrell, who has spent most of his life ministering among the poorest and most vulnerable residents of Waco.

Since many of the former youth group at Highland Baptist were not from "churched families," he was gratified to discover "most are still attending church and growing spiritually."

Dorrell sees that as evidence of the important role youth ministry can play in spiritual formation.

"It can be a crucial ministry at a key time in life," he said.

'A place where I was accepted and loved'

Beth Baird Smith considers her time in the youth group at Highland Baptist a vital part of her spiritual pilgrimage. She and her family moved to Waco from Austin when her father was transferred, and they joined Highland

Baptist.

“I desperately wanted to be in a place where I was accepted and loved,” she said. “That is exactly the incredible environment Jimmy Dorrell created in the youth group at Highland.

“Did I feel a call to missions when I was at the youth group at Highland? No, but the Lord planted seeds in my heart that made it easy to respond to the call later.”

Dorrell continued to make an impression on her in the years that followed. First, he went to work with “another kind of youth group” at the Waco State Home. Later, he and his wife Janet moved to a deteriorating house in a blighted North Waco neighborhood to live among the poor. Through that “incarnational ministry” and the relationships they built, Mission Waco was born.

“Seeing Jimmy live a life for others made a difference in my life. God used him to be a picture of authentic Christianity to me,” Smith said.

In 1998, she and her husband Dale answered God’s call to missions. Dale resigned from his successful legal practice, and the couple left their “beautiful home on 100 acres in Louisiana” to begin a two-decade ministry with Campus Crusade for Christ, focused particularly on unreached people groups.

In 2019, the couple founded a nonprofit organization, [Jesus Said Go](#), that trains indigenous Bible storytellers and disciple-makers among previously unreached people groups in West Africa.

“The seeds that were planted in the youth group at Highland made it so much easier for me to respond to God’s call,” she said.

Today, she leads a discipleship ministry for women at Highland Baptist

Church.

“How precious it is to serve women in the church where my spiritual roots took hold,” she said.

Youth ministry a model for building relationships

Dorrell said his experience in youth ministry prepared him for the pastorate of Church Under the Bridge—a multiracial congregation that includes the unhoused, mentally ill individuals and the working poor, along with students from nearby Baylor University—as well as co-founding Mission Waco.

“Youth ministry was the model for Mission Waco. It started with kids who played basketball on a court outside our home and the relationships we developed with them and their parents,” Dorrell said. “That thread—ministry to children and teenagers—is woven all through our lives.”

At age 73, Dorrell describes himself as “still a youth director at heart.”

“It helps in ministering to broken people through Church Under the Bridge. So many of them never had a childhood. We help them learn to play together. We play touch football and softball and go on picnics. Some of the same games we played in church youth group are what we play at Church Under the Bridge,” he said.

“Laughing together, playing together, messing with each other—the same things we did during my years as a youth director are what we do at Church Under the Bridge. It’s all about building relationships.”