

HSU honors veteran River Ministry leader, dedicates exhibit

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ABILENE—[Hardin-Simmons University](#) honored Texas Baptist River Ministry leader Elmin Howell and his wife, Betty, as missions pioneers and dedicated an on-campus [River Ministry](#) exhibit as a tool to educate the next generation of missions workers.

Howell, who led Baptist General Convention of Texas missions programs along both sides of the Texas/Mexico border for nearly three decades, received the Jesse C. Fletcher Award for distinguished missions service from the university.



Elmin Howell (2nd from right), who led Texas Baptist River Ministry nearly 30 years, visits with (left to right) Bruce Stovall, pastor of Friendship Baptist Church in Albany, Bernard Bolton of Shreveport, La., and John Garner of Franklin, Tenn., at the dedication of a River Ministry exhibit on the Hardin-Simmons University campus. (PHOTO/Paul S. Howell)

“River Ministry is one of the greatest state mission efforts ever attempted by Baptists,” HSU President Lanny Hall said. “It has been blessed by God’s hand.”

During Howell’s tenure, River Ministry started 63 health-care clinics that touched the lives of 500,000 people along the border, helped start more than 600 churches, drilled more than 100 water wells, launched multiple agricultural and community-development projects and involved more than 5,000 churches in hands-on missions, Hall noted.

Howell—a 1952 graduate of Hardin-Simmons—donated documents and memorabilia from his years of River Ministry service to his alma mater with the understanding the collection would be used in missions education.

The university produced a video and created an exhibit in its Connally Missions Center to display the collection. It includes maps, photos, paintings, handcrafts and other items displayed in the O’Brien Room, named in honor of the late Dellanna O’Brien, veteran missionary and Woman’s Mission Union leader. Her husband, Bill, was Howell’s roommate at Hardin-Simmons.

Wayne Shuffield, director of the BGCT evangelism and missions center, noted the area along the Texas/Mexico border is home to 6.5 million people, and the population has grown by about 1 million every 10 years since 1980.

“Visionaries like Elmin Howell could see that early on and see that Texas Baptists needed to reach out and take the gospel of Jesus Christ to them,” Shuffield said.

When Jeane Law, former president of Texas WMU, was growing up in Alabama, all she recalled knowing about the Rio Grande was what she learned from Gene Autry western movies.

Her awareness about the Rio Grande changed drastically in 1967 when Hurricane Beulah brought the needs of people along the Texas/Mexico border to the attention of Texas Baptists.

Concern for the plight of people affected by the hurricane, combined with an already-approved line item in the [Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions](#) for a “Rio Grande Mission Thrust,” gave birth to River Ministry.

“Texas may have been freed from Mexico in 1836, but the two reconnected in 1967,” said Law, a member of First Baptist Church in Lubbock.

In the years that followed, she noted, River Ministry became an integral part of the Texas WMU Week of Prayer for State Missions and the Mary Hill Davis Offering.

John Wilson, a former school superintendent who now serves at Baylor University, remembered when he was a 13-year-old boy and Howell became activities director at First Baptist Church in Beaumont.

“No one other than my own mother and dad had a greater influence on my life than Elmin Howell. He has been a mentor, coach and friend to me,” Wilson said.

Similarly, Ivan Smith recalled his teenaged years in Shreveport, La., when Howell served on a church staff.

“Elmin had a way of getting the job done,” Smith said. “People could not tell Elmin Howell ‘no.’ He was so led by God, you were afraid not to do as he suggested.”