

In the air or on the air, pastor ministers to the Valley

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RIO HONDO—Many things have changed in Gene Horton's 47 years as pastor at [First Baptist Church in Rio Hondo](#), but one thing has remained constant—his love of the people there.



Gene Horton (on screen), pastor of Rio Hondo Baptist Church, at the studios of KGBT-TV in Harlingen recording his television broadcast. (PHOTO: Gulf Aviation Facebook page / KGBT Action 4 News) After Hurricane Buelah blew through the Rio Grande Valley and flooded much of South Texas, Horton flew his small plane from Victoria over the water-covered country. With tears running down his face, he recalled his impression: "I think God is calling me to the Rio Grande Valley."

A few months later, First Baptist Church in Rio Hondo called him as pastor, and he and his wife, Phynetta, began serving the first Sunday of 1968. It

was much smaller than the congregation he left in Victoria, with only about 70 in morning worship in a town boasting a population of about 1,100.

The church also had a Spanish mission it supported.

“We closed it and sold it, because all people—regardless of race, color, creed, class or whatever—are welcome to come through those doors. And when they do, we’re going to tell them that Jesus loves them—and that he will save them,” Horton said.

Horton has become pastor to many more than the congregation who attends on Sunday. He has preached on a local television station 45 years and averages about 100,000 viewers. It is not a recording of his sermon—even though the music portion of the service is a part of the program—but a message crafted especially for viewers at home.

TV program goes far and wide

“I didn’t want to do it, but some here thought we needed to in order to reach people, and thank God we did,” Horton recalled. The church has received mail from as far south as Mexico City in response to the program. Many viewers request prayer or visits for friends or family members in the hospital.

The television program has made Horton a familiar face to many people throughout the Rio Grande Valley.

“I went to Walmart yesterday, and it’s like having church in there,” he said. “Many people who are Catholic tell me how much they enjoy our TV program and congratulate us on it. It’s amazing to me. We’ve had people who have visited the area from Russia, China and all around the world who saw us on television and have come to visit this church.”



Gene Horton

ministers not only to his own congregation at First Baptist Church in Hondo, but also to people throughout the Rio Grande Valley. (PHOTO/George Henson)The church has grown considerably during Horton's tenure. About 350 attend each Sunday in the summer. During the winter months when "snowbirds" move to the Valley to escape the cold of northern regions, attendance can swell to 1,000.

The church added a video feed to its chapel to allow remote viewing for overflow crowds.

Rio Hondo has grown a bit in 47 years, but not nearly as fast as First Baptist Church. The town's population is listed at 1,920 now.

“But we’ve also lost a lot of people. Being here as long as I have, I’ve done a lot of funerals,” he said.

The church remains vibrant by reaching out to younger people in the community— many of them Hispanic. The church’s youth minister and outreach minister both are Hispanic.

The church sponsored a block party that drew hundreds of participants from the community. In addition, the church’s Vacation Bible School and youth ministries constantly draw new children and their families.

While the ministries and the television program attract people to the church, it is not what holds them, Horton said.

Love is the key

“No. 1 is the love. We love people,” he said. “I preach positive sermons. I preach about sin—we’ve all sinned and come short of the glory of God, but Jesus came to forgive us. I preach the gospel.”



A younger version of Gene Horton, posing beside his plane. Horton also keeps his sermons fairly short.

“I used to preach and see if I couldn’t break the record, but I gave that up for Lent,” he said with a laugh. “Now I only preach about 25 minutes,” a secret he said he learned from reading a biography of D.L. Moody.

“We also have a music program that is out of this world,” a ministry his son-in-law has led the last 19 years. “A lot of it is the old-fashioned music that people identify with.”

But as the years go on, more modern music is being incorporated, because he wants people to hear something that will they will feel comfortable with and return to hear again.

“To stay here 47 years, you know something has to be right,” he said with a broad smile. “If I wasn’t having a good time at this, I’d get out, but I don’t want to be anything else ever.”

Horton’s love for the people of the Rio Grande Valley began in the air, and it continues to this day. He flies most mornings and prays as he flies.

“I’ll see people and they’ll tell me, ‘I saw you flying this morning,’” he said. “I’ll tell them, ‘That’s good, because I was praying for you.’”