

# Zac Harrel: 'A front-row seat to the work of God'

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**Zac Harrel** is pastor of First Baptist Church in Gustine, where he has served seven years. He shares his background and thoughts on ministry in the Baptist Standard's "Deep in the Hearts of Texans." To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated minister to be featured in this column or to apply to be featured, [click here](#).

## Background

- *Where else have you served in ministry, and what were your positions there?*

I served three years as the youth minister at First Baptist Church in Port Aransas.

- *Where did you grow up?*

Pittsburg, Texas.

- *How did you come to faith in Christ?*

I walked the aisle and prayed the prayer when I was 8. But the reaching out of a youth minister when I was in high school helped me get serious about my faith.

- *Where were you educated, and what degrees did you receive?*

Bachelor of arts in Christian Studies, Howard Payne University, 2006

Master of divinity, Logsdon Seminary at Hardin-Simmons University, 2011

## **Ministry/church**

- *Why do you feel called into ministry?*

I feel my calling is to help people live lives of ordinary faithfulness. I am called to help my people see all of their lives, the big and the small, as important to God and as opportunities to give glory to God.

- *What is your favorite aspect of ministry? Why?*

My favorite aspect of ministry is just the relationships you get to build. You have a front-row seat to the work of God in the lives of so many people through the good and the bad.

- *What one aspect of congregational life gives you the greatest joy?*

The everyday conversations and interactions you have with your people, where you can see the grace of God at work in their lives and in their families.

- *How has your ministry or your perspective on ministry changed?*

I think the change in my perspective is the truth that one of the most important virtues in pastoral ministry is patience. I started as pastor of this church when I was 24. I wanted everything to grow, to change and to be like every book I had read and every conference challenge I had heard.

The truth is ministry is about patient faithfulness. We have to be faithful to our calling, and we must be patient. God is working. He always is working. We must be faithful, and we must wait on him.

- *Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your congregation.*

I don't think these challenges are just for my congregation.

The first is the fragmentation of our society. We have to learn how to build community and fellowship again. Our technology has done so many wonderful things for us, and our social media world can help us connect to family and friends around the globe, but it also has stunted our ability to live in community in real life. We cannot retreat into polarized enclaves of people who think, act and vote like us. We must learn to build community based on the unity we have in our faith.

The second is the challenge of fear. The world is not like it was when so many of our congregants grew up. The culture is changing rapidly, and this rapid change can produce a paralyzing and angry fear. The influence of 24-hour news and talk radio does not help. The challenge is going to be reminding our churches and ourselves about the hope we have in Christ. We are called to be people of hope, not fear.

The third challenge for the church goes right along with this. Cultural or nominal Christianity is fading, and we should rejoice in this. Our challenge is going to be recovering what it means to be salt and light, to be agents of reconciliation, to be faithful witnesses to our communities and to our world in a rapidly changing culture and world.

### **About Baptists**

- *What are the key issues facing Baptists—denominationally and/or congregationally?*

Religious liberty. To me, this is the key issue going forward for us as Baptists. Will we stick to our historic defense of this liberty for all, or will we give in to fear of the other? We must recognize when religious liberty is taken away from anyone not like us it is only a matter of time before it is taken away from us too. We must stand for religious liberty with conviction.

Another issue is making sure any one political party or ideology does not define us. The gospel cannot be co-opted by any political party. Where the

Bible is clear, we must be clear and stand with boldness and courage. The gospel will offend all political ideologies at some points, and we must be faithful to the gospel.

## **About Zac**

- *Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?*

There have been three major influences on my life and ministry.

*Michael Felkins* was the youth minister who reached out to me in high school, who gave me my first opportunity to teach a Bible study, and who walked me through my calling in ministry. He has influenced me to love the gospel and to preach the gospel.

I interned under *Ricky Cavitt* at Coggin Avenue Baptist Church in Brownwood when I was in college. He gave me so many opportunities to grow, and from him I learned the importance of planting your life in one place and staying the course.

*Andy Dennis* was my Baptist Student Ministry director at Howard Payne University. I was on the leadership team for three years, and from Andy, I learned the importance of one-on-one discipleship and the power of gentleness and kindness in ministry.

- *Name some of your favorite books (other than the Bible) or authors, and explain why.*

This could change from week to week. But my two favorite books in the last year are by the same author, Rod Dreher. They are *The Little Way of Ruthie Leming* and *How Dante Can Save Your Life*. Both books are powerful and exactly what I needed to hear in crucial moments of my own life.

*The Little Way of Ruthie Leming* is a book about Rod's sister, who got sick with cancer and died, leaving her husband and three kids behind. It sounds

unbearably sad, but it is a must read. It is about the power of ordinary faithfulness and love. It is a story of how a small community surrounds and loves this family. Recognizing the impact one simple life can have reminded me of the power of our ordinary, everyday lives, the power of simply loving people in the same place for many years. It is a powerful memoir.

*How Dante Can Save Your Life* is about Rod's struggle with idolatry of family and place as he moves back home after Ruthie's death. After returning home, he finds all of his struggles and baggage from the past with his family still are there. He picks up Dante in a Barnes & Noble bookstore and begins to read. What he realizes is he is in his own "dark wood" and needs a guide out. Dante leads him to see his own sin and the grace of God, and Dante, along with Rod's pastor and counselor, helps him be reconciled with his father. Rod's honesty is refreshing, and his revelation that the problem is his disordered desires, loves and idolatry helped me to look into my own heart and to be honest with myself.

I cannot recommend these books enough.

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