

Blown in by a hurricane, pastor stands strong for 35 years in Valley

RIO HONDO--A hurricane blew Gene Horton toward First Baptist Church in Rio Hondo more than 35 years ago, and it will take another act of God for him to move on.

"I've resigned three times, but each time the people have come together and said, 'We don't accept your resignation.' Well, the last time I told them, 'I'm not resigning any more; you've had your chance,' Horton said with a laugh.

It all began after Hurricane Beulah raged through the southern tip of Texas in 1967. Horton, at the time the pastor of First Baptist Church in Lyford, piloted a small plane down to



Gene and Phynetta Horton

survey damage in the area.

"For some reason, tears started coming down my face, and I thought, 'What's going on here?'" he recalled.

Weeks later, at home in Victoria, he told his wife, Phynetta, "I think God is calling me to the Rio Grande Valley."

He also communicated that thought to Jerry Johnson, then director of missions for Rio Grande Baptist Association. Johnson arranged for Horton to preach at a revival in Alamo, and members of the pastor-search committee from Hondo came to hear him.

After the service, they said to him, "We need you to be our pastor."

On the surface, there appeared to be little reason for Horton to move. He was pastor of a growing church and was being asked to come to a much smaller church.

Still, he came. "I just love the family and felt drawn there," he explained.

The fit has been a good one. During the 35 years Horton has been at the Rio Hondo church, men and women have been called out as missionaries, others ordained as pastors and staff members. The church has built a larger auditorium, fellowship hall and additional parking.

On Jan. 12, the church celebrated Horton's anniversary with fried chicken and fajitas.

For 33 of those years of Horton's 35-year tenure, Sunday morning services have aired on the local ABC affiliate--an outreach ministry Horton said has been instrumental in the church's growth and stature in the community and surrounding area.

"After the first broadcast, we had no room for the people who came the next week, and we've never looked back," he said. "It has made us one of the most visible churches in the area, and people also know me. I didn't say I was famous, though, maybe infamous. People will tell me all the time, 'I saw you on TV,' not really anything else, just 'I saw you,'" he said with a laugh.

The church now has more than 1,600 members and seats almost 900 each Sunday during the months the Winter Texans flood the area.

"We're planning on building a 2,000-seat auditorium on the Main Street in Rio Hondo, in a community of 1,800," Horton said.

With the growth of the church, opportunities to leave for other pastorates have come, but each time Horton has said Rio Hondo is his home.

"Down deep in your soul--now I don't go by just feelings-- you feel like this is where God has placed you. When I've prayed, I've sensed God's telling me that he has matched me perfectly with this church. If I had gone somewhere else, it probably would have been a disaster," he said.

Many things have remained the same in his ministry over the years.

"You have to be kind with people," he advised. "Don't thump them on the chest when they have problems, and don't always try to fix them, and be there when they need you, when things have really gone wrong and they need to someone to help pick up the pieces of their lives.

"Like the song says, 'Love is the theme.' It's been my theme and this church's theme the whole time,"

Horton said.

That is borne out by the church's answering machine. Rather than listing service times or other business affairs, after-hours callers to the church number hear Horton recount all the prayer needs within the congregation--a long list that takes several minutes to recite. He then leads a prayer for those mentioned before the message ends.

"We've been doing that for a number of years, somewhere between seven and 10 years, and I update it every night," he explained. "People call and hear their names and the prayer that's offered for them, and they are comforted and encouraged by that. It means so much to them."

Likewise, Horton has found comfort in his long tenure at First Baptist.

The secret has been "God's keeping power," he said. "He has given me the desire to stay, and he has given the congregation the desire for me to stay."

By Staff Writer George Henson with reporting by Frances Knight