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## **Bird-eye view of Valley left indelible impression on long-tenured pastor**

RIO HONDO—Considering the median tenure for Southern Baptist pastors at any given church is 4.2 years, Gene Horton’s 40-years-and-counting at First Baptist Church in Rio Hondo places him among the ranks of less than one percent of his peers.

Horton, who has been in the ministry 55 years, credits his lengthy of service to “God’s keeping power.”

Frances Knight, who has been a Sunday school teacher at the Rio Hondo church for 38 years, believes the secret of her pastor’s success is simple.

“God has kept him steady because he is a man of prayer, and he faithfully preaches the gospel of salvation,” she said.

“Almost every morning, his small plane can be seen flying over the area of surrounding towns as he is alone with God and praying for not only his church, but also for all pastors of all denominations in the Rio Grande Valley.”

Horton’s experiences at a private pilot led to his initial call to serve in Rio Hondo. After Hurricane Beulah hit the Valley in 1967, he flew his plane from Victoria to the tip of Texas to survey damage.

Tears streamed down his face as he saw the devastation in the area. He later told his wife, “I think God is calling me to the Rio Grande Valley.”

Not long after that, a pastor search committee from First Baptist Church in Rio Hondo heard Horton preach. At the committee’s recommendation, the church in Rio Hondo extended an invitation for him to preach in view of a call.

He and his family began their ministry in Rio Hondo the first Sunday of the new year in 1968. Although Rio Hondo officially has a population of only 1,800, the town becomes a seasonal home to many “Winter Texans” who move to the Valley for a few months each year. During the winter, the sanctuary at First Baptist Church often is filled to capacity with more than 800 worshippers.

For 38 of his 40 years in Rio Hondo, Horton also has extended his ministry to the region through a television program carried on the local ABC affiliate, whose signal reaches from Corpus Christi to northern Mexico.

“What makes this even more remarkable than the long tenure is the fact that Bro. Gene has never asked the television audience for any money. The debt-free local church has funded the telecast,” Knight noted.

“This, too, is evidence of answered prayer,” she added. “Our church is so grateful to have Brother Gene—a true man of god—continuing as our pastor.”



Gene Horton

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