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REX MAYO HORNE JR ...

April 3, 1994 Publication: *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock, AR)* Page: *HP1* Word Count: 2021

Image: Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/Karen VanDonge

REX MAYO HORNE JR

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The Rev. Rex Horne will be among those singing jubilant Easter hymns today at Immanuel Baptist Church. From the pulpit and on television, this Arkansas College graduate has a message of faith, strengthened during seven pastorates and by several pickets.

Sometimes people look for Easter by browsing in the pastels of a spring clothing line. Or maybe by digging to the bottom of a basket full of plastic grass, peanut-butter eggs and chocolate bunnies.

But in the 20 Easters of his ministry, Dr. Rex Horne has preached that one has to dig a little deeper to find the true meaning of the holiday.

"Every time I think of Easter, the first words that come to my mind are the words, 'He is risen, indeed,'" said Horne, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church. "Easter reminds us that there's more to life than the number of years we're granted upon earth.

"I think the message of Easter is about life -- the spring of the year, the life that we see all around us, and renewed hope of this life and the life to come."

Horne talked about the observance of Easter in the quiet of his carpeted study. This is the office where he prepares the four sermons he'll deliver each week during services at Immanuel; one is televised, one broadcast on radio.

His conversational voice is a rich bass, a few pitches lower than the one he speaks with when preaching to his congregation. Horne, who stepped into the pulpit at Immanuel in 1990, will celebrate his fourth anniversary in August.

"I always thought if I could pastor a great church, it would be like Immanuel," he said. When the church asked Horne to join its staff, "I was the only (pastor) they heard, the only one they interviewed. That gave me a real deep sense of peace and conviction.

"One of the reasons that was so important," he added, "is because none of us knew the things we would face individually and ... as a church. To be able to look back and know that the church had great certainty that I was to be their pastor, and that I had the same sense, it made the things that we've gone through easier because of the bond that we felt from the beginning."

The 102-year-old Immanuel is among Arkansas' three largest Southern Baptist churches, with 4,500 names on its membership roll.

Most are Arkansans, of course, but at least one is a prominent Washingtonian.

As home church of President Bill Clinton, Immanuel drew the attention of conservative religious activists in the summer of 1992. A Texan named W.N. Otwell filled the front lawn of the church with protesters waving placards calling for Immanuel to revoke Clinton's membership because of his stand favoring homosexual and abortion rights.

Horne stands on the opposite side of an ideological fence from Clinton. He says the Bible teaches that homosexuality is a sin and abortion is wrong.

But, he said, the Bible also teaches love and tolerance.

"If we believe we are standing solidly on biblical truth," he said, "why wouldn't we want people who disagree with us to come (to church) so the spirit of God can affect their lives?"

Horne -- who says his greatest joy as Immanuel's pastor is "just to stand to preach Sunday by Sunday to people that are very receptive. That's probably the thing that I thrive on most" -- saw the protests draw on week after week.

"It felt like you'd been violated. The Bible talks about 'By this shall all men know you are my disciples, if you have love one for another,' and that we were called upon to love," he said. "I encouraged our people to do that and to act Christlike in the midst of a group of people who acted anything but Christlike.

"So," he added, "to have people on your sidewalk telling your people how bad they are and how sorry their pastor is, you feel like you're violated. It really was not a question of moral issues, because they don't believe any stronger about those things than we do."

Horne takes a lemons-to-lemonade view of the attention thrust on Immanuel during the past couple of years.

"I've been able to talk to more people across America about Christ through television and radio and print media, secular and religious journalists, than I ever would have had if Bill Clinton had not been elected president," he said. "God uses things for good, and I think this is an opportunity that has been afforded us.

"I'm not an apologist for the president's policies or any other member of our church, nor are they an apologist for me," he added. "I tell our folks that we're not a political caucus, we're a church. What people need to hear is the truth of God's word rather than my opinion on tuition tax credits ... or that kind of stuff."

Part 2 of 2

Although the public protests are not as frequent these days, Horne and his secretary field calls and receive letters almost every day from people who wonder why Clinton's name hasn't been removed from the books at Immanuel.

"I've looked on this as an opportunity to show people you can be theologically conservative and not be mad about it," Horne said, "that you can have strong convictions and be Christlike in your dealing with all people."

Every week during Sunday morning services, Horne offers a prayer for Clinton.

"It's an admonition of scripture to pray for those who are in authority. You know, I pray not only for the president, we pray for the governor and for local leaders and others each Sunday," he said. "But I think also if the church that has been his home for 14 years does not pray for him, what church in America could we expect to pray for him?"

"If people can find an argument with praying for the president, their argument is not with Rex Horne, their argument's with God. And they can take it up with him."

Steve Lampkin, senior vice president and administrator of Baptist Medical Center, has known Horne since both moved their families to Little Rock and joined Immanuel four years ago.

Both as a pastor and a personal friend, Lampkin said, Horne is "very real, very authentic. He'll tell you what he thinks. There's no facade there. It's easy to be critical, but it's hard to pray, and to pray unbiasedly. And Rex always does."

"What I have come to know about Rex through our friendship is that he is a very humble individual. He recognizes the tremendous weight of responsibility that goes along with being a pastor of a large church, and the unbelievable responsibility that goes along with being the pastor of the president. But he handles it in such a way that if you didn't know that, it would never come across," he added.

Lampkin said Clinton and Horne talk every week.

"One could say it must be a privilege or honor to have the president's ear on a regular basis. I would reverse that," Lampkin said. "I think President Clinton is fortunate to have a pastor like Rex Horne who has one thing on his heart, to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, and to befriend -- as a pastor who does not have an agenda -- the individual person who happens to be the president of the United States. When they talk, they can talk as people."

When he was a little boy in Camden, Horne probably never thought much about growing up to be the pastor of a president. But he said he did feel from the time he was young that there was likely to be a pulpit in his future.

As a sophomore at Ouachita Baptist University in 1972, Horne decided to enter the ministry -- and to take a partner with him. That year he married his hometown sweetheart, Becky Warnock, two days before Christmas.

"I didn't know her till she was in about the sixth or seventh grade, so she had a long life before I knew her," Horne joked. "She's in nursing school right now, working on her RN degree through Baptist (Medical Center)."

After spending a few months in school in Mobile, Ala., where his parents then lived, Horne moved with his new wife to Batesville at the urging of the Rev. Bob Parker, pastor of First Baptist Church there. Parker had been Horne's pastor in Camden.

Horne joined Parker's staff as youth minister while he finished a bachelor of arts degree in behavioral science at Arkansas College. He went on to receive a master of divinity degree at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth and a doctor of ministry degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Pastorates in Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas followed before Horne returned to his Arkansas roots. By this time his family numbered six -- the Hornes are the parents of Ashley, 16; Holly, 13; Wendy, 11; and Truett, 8.

During the next few months, Horne's administrative plate filled quickly. Immanuel was planning a \$4 million expansion project, and fund-raising started in June 1991. Since that time, a fellowship hall was built to accommodate 1,000 people; a new choir suite and library, as well as Sunday school space, were added; and mechanical updates and cosmetic changes were completed. A two-story atrium now connects the addition with the original building.

"The campaign itself will be completed in June. We'll have raised a great majority of the money -- we'll be over \$3 million -- by the time the campaign is over," Horne said. "It worked out very well." Since he gave a benediction at the 1992 Democratic National Convention in New York City, Horne's attention has sometimes been drawn away from Little Rock. He's an occasional guest at the White House, sometimes invited to pray over a special event -- and sometimes given an audience with the president.

"Every time I go, it stirs my own patriotism and love of our country. But being this closely connected with the leader of our country, as pastor of his church, it also stirs within me an anguish, or almost a sorrow that we can't find a way to work some important matters out," he said.

"When you consider the people who have walked those halls, you see portraits and you recognize the things that a man such as Abraham Lincoln accomplished and stood for in those very rooms; it gives you a sense of the promise of God in protecting and nurturing this country for all these years."

When he makes time to relax, Horne plays racquetball, walks on a treadmill, or picks up a book or magazine. He's a fan of country music, and he also likes to spend the day on Petit Jean Mountain with his family, or watch the Hogs play ball.

Horne also gives his time to community activities outside Immanuel's walls. He's on the boards of Parkway Village and Baptist Medical System, and is an executive board member of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention.

His goals for the church involve community service, too.

"We're planning right now, for instance, a big football banquet next December to invite all the area football teams in, have a speaker and recognize different people from the teams ... to allow our church to minister to different cross sections of our community," he said.

"And too, just continuing in some ministries, like the Boost program that tutors inner-city kids on Wednesday nights. We bring them here from different shelters and feed them, and we have a group of ladies who go over their school assignments with them and teach them about Christ."

Horne said his seven pastorates have "each had a definite contribution to make to my life." Experiences with different churches leave an impression on a minister, "sometimes showing where you are gifted, and perhaps at other times, to show you where you're not. But coming to Immanuel has been not only something that I have enjoyed, it has been defining just in the work that has come our way and the opportunities that we have."

In his four years with the congregation there, he said, "I think we've learned that some things are thrust upon you that you can never expect, but through it all, I think that we have realized what a church is to be ...a place that ministers, to any and everyone, the gospel of Christ."

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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette (Little Rock, AR)

Date: April 3, 1994

Page: HP1

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