

Pastor helps rebuild lives



Jack Auten, a retired preacher, plays on three keyboards stacked on top of each other. Auten spends his days performing music and sermons for people across the world through the Internet.

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Auten reaches people across the globe

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PANGBURN - Retired pastor Jack Auten has helped rebuild many churches during his 45 years of service. A Southern Baptist vocational preacher, he has pastored 11 churches in Arkansas and Florida.

He was born in Judsonia on Dec. 12, 1936. Auten's father was a vocational preacher, and his mother a schoolteacher.

He attended college for about a semester when he was just 17, and then he worked at a drugstore in Judsonia.

“And the doctor, C.W. Jackson, the druggist, he sent me to the St. Louis College of Pharmacy,” Auten said. “And I lasted two weeks.”

That's when he joined the US Air Force in 1956, where he met his future wife, Kathy, in 1958. Auten's father, who was Kathy's pastor, introduced them.

“It was kind of like, for me anyway it was sort of like well, this is it,” he said. “I’m not looking anymore; there she was. Just love at first sight I guess you could say.”

They married the next year, which was his last in the Air Force. The couple moved to Searcy, where Auten worked in the parts department at Truman Baker Chevrolet.

“And of course, all this time, you know, there was this pull to the ministry, but I didn’t want to do that,” Auten said. “But then finally after our son was born, I realized what I needed to do....That’s when I went before the church and said God wants me to be a preacher. And from then, doors opened.”

Dr. J.D. Patterson, who lived next door to them, told Auten that he needed to go to college. He spoke with the president of students at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia to help get Auten enrolled and he graduated in three years with his Bachelor of Arts Degree. Auten then went to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, and graduated in three years with a Master of Divinity Degree.

Auten was still attending the seminary when he went to the northeast Arkansas town of Harrisburg, where he preached one Sunday.

“We went to that little old church and Kathy and I were disgusted. They hadn’t taken care of it,” Auten said.

After the church service, they went to have lunch at one of the church member’s houses.

“We heard a train coming through town. And we said, ‘we didn’t know you had a train.’” Auten recalled.

As it turns out, it was a tornado that blew through town and destroyed only the church.

“And when the tornado came and tore up their buildings, they said, ‘you will come back and build it; you will be our pastor.’ It was a joke of course,” Auten said. “Of course, I did.”

After he graduated, he moved his family to Harrisburg, where they helped rebuild the church better than it was before. Auten and his family stayed there for about four years. They broke all of the attendance records there, as well as baptism records, Auten said.

In 1974, he went to pastor in Marmaduke for the next 18 months, where they built an education building. Then, in 1976, he went to pastor the Second Baptist Church in West Memphis.

“We had a little contest,” Auten said. “If we have 300 in Sunday school, then I’ll get up on top of the church and sing. And somebody called the police, and said some guy’s going to jump off the church. The West Memphis police showed up. There I was on top of the building, singing Amazing Grace, and they thought that I was going to jump.”

After more than seven years in West Memphis, Auten received a call from a friend who lived in Florida, who told him about a church in Miami Springs that had split, with about 300 people leaving. Auten and his wife traveled to Miami Springs where he preached a revival, and then they returned home to West Memphis. The Florida church soon decided that they wanted him to be their pastor, so, he and Kathy left for Florida.

The church seated over 1,200 people and the Autens stayed there for about four years.

“We had a mission in the Everglades out there with the Miccosukee Indians. Now that was interesting,” Auten said. “And when you would preach, you could only use just a few words and then it would have to be translated into Miccosukee. It might take you 45 minutes to do a 10-minute presentation.”

The American Indians also adopted Auten into their tribe.

“It was a reservation. So they would put on shows, like alligator wrestling, and they would do things, like hold their [alligator's] heads open and stick their head in. And they would do their dances. And what was really beautiful and yet scary, kind of eerie like, songs that you're familiar with in church, that you would sing, they would do it.”

They would sing like the Native Americans did in the “old cowboy and Indian shows,” Auten said.

“You would sing in English,” he said. “You'd had to wait for them to get all of their words in and you'd then move on to the next verse. But it was just beautiful.”

Auten eventually suffered from burnout and the family returned to Arkansas to Monet. They stayed there for about five or six years.

Auten's greatest challenge was yet to come. In 1992, Hurricane Andrew hit Homestead, Fla. Jack and Kathy went down to visit a friend in Miami Springs who told them that they needed to see Homestead.

“It was just pitiful, heartbreaking,” Auten said of the destruction.

Officials called Auten a month or two later and asked him to be their pastor.

“People were living in cardboard boxes in the alley under tents,” he remembered. “Wasn't any grass left, the wind was so strong it had blown the grass away...They were living in their houses or trailers with windows blown out. That first Sunday, there were only about 75 in church.”

The church voted to relocate and bought 10 acres at the edge of town.

“So we built a facility for 350 people,” Auten said. “And it took us a little over a year to

build it. Our first Sunday, we had 450 people....People from all over the world, in the winter time, would come to the Florida Keys. Well, to get to the Florida Keys, you had to come right past our church. And they would stop because it was so beautiful...This was sort of the climax, you could say, of our ministry.”

Auten designed the church. People stopped to see the church because of the design and color. The church was built with a pink block that was imported from the West coast.

After about nine years in Florida, Auten's mother became sick. He resigned from the church so he could move back to Arkansas to take care of her. However, his mother died the day before they left.

He pastored at Horseshoe Bend, Sidon, and Rocky Point before retiring from preaching.

“But Kathy reminded me that God is never through with you if you're still here,” Auten said.

It all started when Auten began building his own pipe organ out of three keyboards, which were connected to a laptop with a computer pipe organ program. He downloaded music for pipe organs for churches that didn't have an organ. Through this, he came into contact with a retired Baptist Australian preacher who asked Auten if he had ever thought of putting his sermons on a Web site. Auten didn't know anything about Web sites.

“But he said, ‘I do. This is what I did for a living; I'm a computer expert,’” Auten said. “So he designed a Web site for me.”

His Web site's address is: www.sermons2liveby.com.

People from 88 countries have downloaded his sermons, and 38 states in the U.S., Auten said, and added that his perspective has also changed as he has aged.

“I'm finding that things that I thought were really important are not as important as I thought they were.” And the more important other things become, he added, such as talking with his wife of 50 years over breakfast.

And Kathy also reminds him that through his sermons on the Web site, he can reach people he never could have.

“But He's letting me pastor on the other side of the world through others,” Auten said. “I'm finding that we've done more good than we realized. Only God really knows what good we've done.”