



Rev. William Ernest Denham III

In the late 1930's William E. Denham, Jr. of St. Louis, Missouri, and Priscilla Kelley of Savannah, Georgia, were students at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Among their classmates was Herbert Howard of Troy, Alabama, who dated the charming Miss Kelley, but she married the Denham suitor. When the Denhams' first child was born, the proud parents named him after his father and paternal grandfather. Among the first to hold baby Bill were Howard and his bride, Martha Lou Montgomery of Lancaster, Kentucky. The Howards and the Denhams were good friends through the years, especially after the men received their PhDs and accepted pastorates in Texas. Both Priscilla and Martha were founders and served as President of the Ministers' Wives of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Bill was born in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1943. He grew up in Macon, Georgia, the location for one of his favorite stories, the Lone Ranger Birthday Party (and the busload of surprise guests from the Georgia State Orphanage).

The Denhams moved to Houston when Dr. Denham was called to be the first pastor of the River Oaks Baptist Church. Their home was the parsonage on Portsmouth and then on Chevy Chase, across the street from Sally Goerner (Bridges). Bill enjoyed the many long-ago friends from school days at River Oaks Elementary, Lanier Junior High, and Lamar High School, friends like Sally, and Bonnie Crain Hellums, Susan Silvus, George and Marsha Moore Moody, Nancy Sharp, Marcia Mathes, Alan Nash, Ken Jacobson, and so many others.

Bill began his college years at Baylor University where he was elected Vice-President of the freshman class and was among the founding brothers of KOT fraternity. Following his years in the U.S. Army serving in Germany, he entered the University of Texas in Austin and graduated in 1970.

During his Army training, Bill wrote to an SMU coed, asking for a blind date. Charmed by the letter, Laura Howard accepted the GI's invitation but not, within weeks, his proposal. After some twists and turns, Bill and Laura were married August 6, 1971, at Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas. Their fathers both officiated, and thus began more than 49 years of a very special marriage.

While his three younger siblings all became ordained ministers, Bill pursued a business career in Austin real estate, ownership of several Mr. Gatti's Pizza franchises in Beaumont, and then a director of the Houston Zoo. In his mid-fifties, his direction changed when he decided to answer God's call to pursue the ministry in a parish setting.

He attended his first Annual Conference in 2000, was commissioned and sent to Local Pastor's School at Lon Morris College, where he first met Linda Christians and Andy Noel of St. Luke's and Wick Stuckey of Chapelwood UMC. He and Laura sold their little blue house, moved to a parsonage in Rusk County, and began their work.

Bill had accepted a student pastorate at Good Springs and Bethel churches near Henderson, located on State Highway 79, as were each of his next two appointments. Classes at Perkins School of Theology at SMU began in September, but learning began on Day One. Within a week of his arrival, Bill held his first funeral.

Vacation Bible School and home visits filled his summers. He organized Good Springs church's first live nativity pageants (all 19 children in the congregation wore costumes and sang; only the two Waggoner great-grandsons engaged in a minor sheep-goat scuffle), held their first Christmas Eve Communion services (attendance of Bill, Laura, the church treasurer, and her husband), and took the youth to summer camp at Lakeview. Four years there included his first opportunity to lead a revival (at Peach Orchard UMC).

Upon graduation from Perkins in 2004, Bill was named Class Favorite. The friends he made there remained dear to him for all his days, especially Ron Perceful of Oklahoma City and Richard Prather of Baytown.

He was then appointed to Mt. Zion UMC, east of Carthage. Here Bill began teaching the Disciple Bible sessions in sequence, and he led the church's first confirmation class in many a year. This church was the locale for his beloved story, "I love you and there's nothing you can do about it," and perhaps the very best VBS on earth!

Upon ordination three years later, he was appointed to First Methodist, Grapeland. Five wonderful years in this community included paying off the church's sizable building note, organizing a working Methodist Men's group, hosting a weekly radio program, "branding" the church as FIRST LOVES, based on a favorite scripture, billboard advertising, and doubling church participation.

Bill also began studies at the Houston Graduate School of Theology, concentrating on spiritual growth under the inspired guidance of Professor Mike Luedde.

But in February 2012, Bill got a phone call from Dr. Tom Pace of St. Luke's, Houston. There followed an interview on campus, an important visit with Dr. Boyd Wagner, and a clear "sign" from somebody who walked into the office, a church member named Fella Knight. Bill accepted a new role, Pastor of Caring Ministries, and was blessed to serve eight years at St. Luke's. These years were successful because of the talents and dedication of his assistants Laurie Kereluk and Shelley Macdaniel Quillin, his Friends at Home leaders Jan and Debbie Agee, his Stephen Ministry team leaders Virginia Moyers and Sharon Hempler, and a wonderful set of hospital visitors. All were invaluable in his ministry.

Bill is survived by his devoted wife Laura Howard Denham and their three children: Will and his son Russell of Shanghai, China; Martha and her husband LTC Whit Campbell and their sons William and Bryant of Elizabethtown, Kentucky; Jim and his wife Dr. LeeAnn Denham and their three children Elizabeth, James, and Victoria of Birmingham, Alabama. Bill loved his children dearly and was so proud of each one, but he adored these precious grandchildren. His siblings are Rev. Jim Denham and his wife Molly of Wimberley, Rev. Dr. Priscilla Denham of Royersford, Pennsylvania, and Rev. Elizabeth Denham Thompson and her husband Phil of Littleton, Colorado. He is also survived by many nieces and nephews.

Bill passed away on Friday, December 4, 2020 at his home in Houston.