



## Pastor Gina Harrison – “Don’t Wait for the Bear!”

Tyler County Booster, August 20, 2015, 8A.

The Rev. Gina Harrison pastors Agape Church, a few miles west of Colmesneil in the country. On August 30 they will celebrate 25 years.

She helped establish the church, left, came back and is still the longest serving of the four woman pastors in the county and the most senior at 87 with no plans to retire.

Appearing much younger, she has a bit of steel in her eyes when she talks about her children and her church. They are her life and she is ready to protect them.

It is hard to be a pastor. Harder to be a woman pastor.

“I begged God to let me teach women. But when God calls, you had best answer,” in her clear articulate East Texas accent.

In a world gone largely mad and sacrilegious, the church takes many hits from secular self-aggrandizing elites or drunks with little else to do. Or, the church becomes a social club trying to be like those who hate it. Then there are the unfazed servants striving to help their flock cope, serve God, listen to His Word, and overcome the hell this world so often throws.

She has been serving all of her life. These days she prays a lot, looking forward to each Sunday and the woman’s study group during the week.

Gina invited her sister, June, to come and live with her for the last four years of her sister’s life. Before that, she took care of her husband for 31 years after he lost a lot of mobility from a stroke and lost his ability to speak, passing in 2001.

Mother Teresa said, “I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.”

Gina is that paradox. Though it is not easy to be a pastor, you would not know it in Gina’s world of caring and loving others. She does not give up.

“Love pastoring. I got to do what I really love,” she said.

Though, as a child, she wanted to be an actress and go to Broadway. She grew up in a strict home where, when daddy spoke, it was as the Lord speaking. Her younger brother could not say “Virginia,” and so “Gina” became her name at home.

Raised in Woodville, she graduated from Kirby High School with Josiah Wheat, and her class was part of the first Dogwood Parade, where the boys dressed like soldiers and the girls like nurses. She attended Mary Harden Baylor College where she minored in speech and majored in English.

She met Ken while he was working for Southwestern Bell, and they married in 1948, the year Israel became a nation.



They lived in Lack Jackson until her husband had a stroke as just 42. Gina took early retirement from Dow Chemical in 1988, and they moved to Colmesneil where they had a weekend cabin.

“I wanted to get him up here for a simpler life.”

They started the Agape Church in 1989 in their guest house, but he could not preach and had lost a lot of his memory. Nevertheless, she kept Ken in the loop all the way. Though speechless, he could understand things and was her prayer partner. She never gave up.

“Agape Church has a great love for people. We are very studious,” Gina said. “Very serious about the Bible. Jesus is the head of the church and we honor Him.”

Later, she and Ken moved to Washington State, near one son. A young man, Jerry Owens, took over Agape with the stipulation that, if he was going to leave, he would call her.

Gina and Ken started the Living Word Church in Washington, and after about four years got the call from Owens. To make a long story short, they came back to Agape and—listening to Gina—she will be here until God calls her home. Though, to this day, those in Washington still miss her and call her for prayer.

“My thought on the Scriptures,” she implored, “is that the word of God is alive and speaks to me to today. I am a widow and live in a mobile home on land that belongs to the church. Unless the message speaks to my life, and how to live better today, I don’t need it. If the message cannot relate to where I am and where my people are, in all of their troubles, sufferings and goals in life, then I am not going to preach it.”

She started and maintained a ministry school from 1998-2009, a rigorous three-year course of study equipping men and women for ordination, teaching the theology of Christ, church history and how to study the Bible.

“We have 114 members,” she said, “but all do not come every Sunday.”

Co-Pastor Clifford Russell helps with sound and teaches from time to time, and Victory Camp Minister Gloria Russell teaches a Sunday school class, both the parents of Booster General Manager Kelli Barnes.

Her oldest son, Kenneth Michael Harrison, retired from Atkinson Candy Company, and just had a motorcycle accident in Lufkin in July. Gina prayed hard for him and he is better now—thank God. Her youngest son just retired as a pediatrician and travels the world, with not a few worries and a lot of prayers from mom. She has two grandsons and two great-grandchildren.

“I don’t like excess. I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and walking with Him every day is what life is about ... acknowledging God every day.” Gina measures her words with a conviction borne over three decades of ministry and four decades of self-sacrifice.

“I believe we ought to have joy on the journey.” She looks you straight into the eyes. “That we might have life and more abundantly.... It is okay to be human.... I used to get hurt when some would criticize. I would weep. Ministry is hard at times. But I listened to God. It is better to obey God than man. After all these years, God has blessed.”

The church supported a missionary in Kenya. He died, but the ministry continues.

Her little dog Honey is seven, and Smokey her cat is 17. They scurry about. The church has a clothes closet and food. They collect it and make it available for a couple of weeks, and if no one comes to get it, they take it to the women’s shelter.

“I don’t have time to hold grudges,” she said, looking down briefly, then back eye to eye. “I lost Ken, my dear husband, and my sweet sister, June, and my children live far away. Yet, I pray. I have also learned to delegate. I spend hours in prayer every day. I would like to visit Kenya

again, yet I am happiest right here at the church. It’s my life. Though many in today’s world never find their true calling, I am so fortunate that I found mine.”

She loves her church and people and is thinking about writing a book.

Smiling again, she squinted to emphasize, “I would much prefer to hear the Trumpet of the Lord right out here in Colmesneil.” She waved her hand gently. “Yet, I’ve thought long and hard about a book. I’ll name it, ‘Don’t Wait for the Bear.’ Does that sound strange to you?” She paused to let that simmer. “You know the Eskimos put their people out on the ice when they get old. When their time comes, that person just has to wait for the polar bear to come.”

“Not me!” Gina gustily encouraged, “Don’t wait for the bear! Don’t wait for the bear! Get up and run!” She laughed. “I am going to go out running.” As should we all.

### Agape Church

