

In Honor of J. Foy Johnson, My Former Pastor

When J. Foy Johnson passed away on July 29 at age 90, he was prominent enough in Assemblies of God circles that we ran his obituary in Charisma News. But what we didn't print was that he was my pastor when I was a teenager and had been a family friend since then.

Friday as they lay him to rest in my hometown of Lakeland, Fla., I will be two states away. I regret I can't attend his service to show my deep respect and to offer my condolences to his eight children. So I'll share my thoughts here to honor the life of a man most of my readers never knew. But you can learn from his life. [Click here to read his official obituary.](#) What follows are my memories:

- He was a godly and spiritual man. There was never the hint of scandal. He exhibited Christ's love all the years I knew him. There's no question he loved Jesus.
- He grew over the years as a leader. He started his preaching career with his older brother as Nazarene evangelists and received the baptism of the Holy Spirit in a church in Alabama, where he met his future wife. He turned down a pharmaceutical scholarship to Auburn University to go into the ministry and pastored in Georgia and in a small town in Florida before moving to Lakeland in 1952 to lead Lakeland First Assembly of God.

When I moved to Florida in elementary school I was impressed by how big Lakeland First Assembly was. It wasn't a megachurch by today's standards, but it was considered huge back then. Brother Johnson set the foundation for the explosive growth that took place in the church in the decades that followed when he was elected district superintendent of the Peninsular Florida District of the Assemblies of God in 1966. I was in

9th grade then.

In the 24 years Brother Johnson was district superintendent, the district grew and today is one of the largest in the denomination. In 1976 he was elected an AG non-resident executive presbyter for the southeastern region, a role he filled for 18 years. He held many other important positions, including being a board member for Southeastern University. He helped begin a home for unwed mothers, and he purchased and built the Masterpiece Gardens Family Conference Center in Lake Wales, Fla. These accomplishments are certainly a long way from his humble beginnings.

- Brother Johnson had a wonderful sense of humor. I last heard him speak at district council in May, where he made everyone laugh telling funny stories of the old days. Especially funny was the story I remember him telling of how he and his cousin Roy married two sisters in Alabama in a double wedding. After Roy died, his wife, Margorine, remarried. Years later, when his beloved wife, Aline, died and Marjorine's second husband had passed away, he married his sister-in-law. When I saw him at an Assemblies event and congratulated him on remarrying, he let me know there was still a spring in his step and gleam in his eye.

I told him in May someone should videotape some of his interesting stories. He said he didn't think anyone would be interested, but he agreed to let me do it. Sadly he became seriously ill and died before I could do it.

One question I would have asked him was whether it was true that when his son Gaius (who now goes by Howard) was born, a woman in his church asked about the baby's name. In his broad Southern accent, Brother Johnson said "Gaius," which sounded a lot like "guess." The lady protested: "Brother Johnson, you know I was never good at guessing!"

Gaius is a year younger than me, so we were in the same youth group. Joel and Michael, both a couple of years older, were in the same school marching band. Johnny is the same age as my brother Paul, and when Paul comes to town we like to go golfing with Johnny.

- Brother Johnson was a good friend. As a child, to me he was bigger than life; so as an adult I enjoyed getting to know him. Once my wife, Joy, and I were on the same tour with Brother Johnson to Switzerland, Germany and Italy. He wasn't at all aloof as I assumed he'd be, and he even called his wife "Aline." (As a teenager I only heard him call her "Sister" Johnson.) On another tour I got to travel with him to attend the World Pentecostal Conference in Kenya. I spent many hours on that trip benefitting from his wisdom.
- He was gracious. Only once did an issue come between us. I took the side of an Assemblies pastor who was being hounded by some in the denomination who felt the man went too far on the charismatic spectrum from the traditional AG way of doing things. When I expressed my concerns in a letter to Brother Johnson, he was very gracious in his reply. And in the end I felt he did the right thing.
- He was an encourager and restorer. Johnny told me that over and over again ministers coming through the viewing line last Thursday evening said that he encouraged them to stay in the ministry because God was a God of second chances.
- He valued family—not only his own rather large biological family, but his Assemblies of God family. And in his later years he attended many funeral services as his friends and peers one by one were "promoted to glory," as old-time Pentecostals refer to death. Two he attended were for my dad, A. Edward Strang, and Joy's dad, Harvey D. Ferrell. Both were ordained ministers in the Assemblies of God.

Having him attend meant a lot to the family, so I regret I can't return the favor. But we can rejoice in the good he did and the multiplied thousands of lives he touched—including mine.