

90th Birthday and 50th Anniversary Article
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**Joyous Celebration of Pastor's 90th Birthday
and 50th Anniversary Heading San Jose Church**

Posted May 27, 2012 By Joe Rodriguez jrodriguez@mercurynews.com



With rousing gospel music and heartfelt testimonials, hundreds of people who have heard the Rev. Kelly Smith's moving sermons celebrated his 90th birthday Sunday and 50th anniversary at the church he practically built with his own hands and determination in East San Jose.

"He's the old rock of salvation," Dianna Grant, a member of the Friendship Church of God in Christ. "His style is down-home. You can't stay in your seat."

But it was not Smith's occasion to sermonize and, truth be told, he's slowed down a bit.

As the honoree, he sat resplendent in a white suit as 300 worshipers filed into his modified, A-frame church with the high wooden ceiling and amber chandeliers. Several singers, some alumni of the choir he founded, belted out a string of soulful, feverish gospel tunes in his honor.

In between, ordinary congregants and local pastors, some mentored by Smith, lined up to praise and thank him. Even City Councilman Xavier Campos showed up at the celebration with a special commendation for the pastor.

The organized thank-you party set off early Sunday afternoon and sailed happily into evening.

"The fact that he's in his 90s now and still doing some of the things he did so well in his youth is a blessing to us all," said Doris Lowery, a church secretary.

A tall man who still walks with a straight back, Smith was born May 10, 1922, in El Dorado, Ark., the third of eight children born to poor, sharecropper parents. A sister, Rosie Richard, said her brother showed early signs of a religious calling by preaching to his siblings in their playhouse when they were children. When they stopped listening, he'd preach to the chickens in the chicken coop.

"Yep, he sure did do that," Richard said with a laugh.

Gifted Singer

Smith was 25 years old when he and his brother Curtis joined the migration of African-Americans from the American South to the Bay Area during and after World War II. Smith had settled in as a butcher for the San Jose Meat Packing Co. when he joined Prayer Garden, a small church near downtown in 1948. There he met and married his first wife, Vila Mae Alexander. They raised five children before she died in 1988.

A gifted singer, Smith joined the church choir and formed the Starlight Singers quartet, the first African-American gospel group to sing on a local radio broadcast from San Jose's De Anza Hotel. Under Smith's management, the quartet performed throughout California. Although active in the church, he yearned to fulfill his childhood ambition.

"I was going to church and I enjoyed going to church," Smith said last week in his office, which is chock full of award plaques, photographs and model cars. "I said, 'Lord, what do you want me to do?' He let me know I should go into the ministry."

Although he never attended high school or college, Smith was ordained by a Church of God in Christ bishop in 1957 and became a youth pastor admired for organizing popular revivals. He also traveled and preached throughout the South and Midwest.

"My dad is self-taught in everything he has achieved," said his daughter Naomi Hammonds.

Never Angry

Wanting his own ministry, Smith bought a small house on East San Antonio Street, knocked down some walls and opened the Friendship Church 50 years ago.

"We fit about 20 people at a time when we started," he said. "Sometimes we got to 40, but that's all it could take."

As his flock grew steadily, he left his meat plant job and began a full-time career as a minister. He started daily, noon prayer services that attracted worshippers from beyond his own church. He tore down the old house as they built and opened a new, much larger church in 1971. There he launched a computer-learning center, community food bank and English classes for Hispanic immigrants. He lives nearby with his second wife, Helen Smith.

"I've never seen him angry," said Grant, a congregant for 30 years. "He was always helping people and he was persistent in his kindness. He always gave us a good reason for coming back to his church."

Smith also inspired several young African-Americans to enter the ministry. Several of them, including J.W. Macklin, a bishop in the Church of God in Christ, spoke at celebratory services for Smith on Saturday.

Smith has delegated many church activities to others but he can still deliver a Sunday sermon with his trademark, a mighty point of his hand to the wooden beams holding up his church.

"Preach and you live," he said. "That's my motto."

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Photos



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Rev. Kelly Smith, in white suit, enters the church for a celebration for Rev. Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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From left to right, Ruby Haylett, niece, Ressie Camerson, sister-in-law, and Rosie Lee Richard, sister, of Rev. Kelly Smith wait for Smith to arrive to celebrate his 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. The Friendship Church in San Jose celebrated Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday and 50 year's of service to the African-American church and community. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith, center, is escorted in to the church by his daughter Naomi Hammonds, far left, and son Kelly Smith, for a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith listens to speakers during a celebration for Rev. Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Programs are handed out during a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith raises his hand in approval to a speaker during a celebration for Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith smiles during a celebration for Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Nancy Barker, left, pins a corsage on to Rev. Kelly Smith for a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith, right, listens to his eldest niece Ruby Haylett, left, sing in his honor to celebrate Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. The Friendship Church in San Jose celebrated Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday and 50 year's of service to the African-American church and community. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Pastor Mac Winbush, from Shreveport, La, delivers a sermon during a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. Winbush was taught by Rev. Smith. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith shakes hands with San Jose City Council member Xavier Campos, left, after Campos presented him with a commendation during a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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to celebrate Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. The Friendship Church in San Jose celebrated Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday and 50 year's of service to the African-American church and community. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Dr. Kenneth Hammonds, son-in-law, addresses the crowd during a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith, center, is escorted in to the church by his daughter Naomi Hammonds, center right, and son Kelly Smith, center left, for a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith listens to a speaker during a celebration for Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith, right, gets a kiss from his second wife Helen Smith, during a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Ruby Haylett, niece, smiles before a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Audience members, including Helen Smith, second wife, and Ressie Cameron, sister-in-law, listen to a song during a service for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. The Friendship Church in San Jose celebrated Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday and 50 year's of service to the African-American church and community. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Friends and family pray at the end of a celebration for Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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Rev. Kelly Smith chats after a celebration for Rev. Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)



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to celebrate Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday (which was on May 10th) and 50 years of service at Friendship Church of God in Christ in San Jose, Calif. on Sunday, May 27, 2012. The Friendship Church in San Jose celebrated Rev. Kelly Smith's 90th birthday and 50 year's of service to the African-American church and community. (Nhat V. Meyer/Staff)