

# In the News

Prestonwood Baptist Church

## Plano mega-church names building after children's program leader

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When a building bears an individual's name, often it's because the individual wrote a big check.



VERNON BRYANT/DMN

Sondra Saunders has overseen Sunday school and other programs for children at the 27,000-member Prestonwood Baptist Church since its founding in 1977.

But Prestonwood Baptist Church will cut the ribbon Sunday morning on a building named for a hired hand, albeit a special one.

The \$7.5 million Saunders Children's Building honors Sondra Saunders, who since the church's founding in 1977 has overseen Sunday school and other programs for children through age 12.

She recalled the staff meeting at which she learned the building would be named for her.

"My knees gave out, and I had to sit down," she said. "I'm still overwhelmed."

The Rev. Jack Graham, senior pastor at Prestonwood, said the Plano megachurch had never named a building for anyone and probably never would again.

But he felt, and other church leaders agreed, that the longevity and quality of Mrs. Saunders' service merited an exception.

"You can't compare anyone to her," he said. "She is the very heart of this congregation and its love for children and families."

Mrs. Saunders, 70, said her passion for children's ministry owes in part to her own childhood in Florida.

Her family did not attend church but let her, beginning at age 4, go with a family in the neighborhood.

"Sunday school teachers just continually invested in me," she said. "That's why I feel it's so important to reach the unchurched person."

After college, Mrs. Saunders hoped to be a foreign missionary. But a bout with cancer disqualified her. A pastor suggested she become what Baptists call a home missionary, and she did, focusing on children.

She's in her 47th year of such work, having served two Florida churches, then Northway Baptist in Dallas, before becoming an original staff member of Prestonwood – begun as a mission of Northway.

As Prestonwood has grown into one of the nation's largest congregations, with 27,000 members, the children's ministry there has kept pace.

Mrs. Saunders supervises 32 staff members and 1,800 volunteers. More than 3,000 children attend weekend programs, and 1,300 come on Wednesday night.

Though Sunday school is the big draw, Mrs. Saunders and her staff see about 500 children on Tuesday and Thursday, for Mother's Day Out, and about 250 preschoolers on Wednesday morning while their mothers are in a Bible study.

With Sunday school, children meet first in large assemblies, then retire to Bible classes, where the student-teacher ratio is 10-to-1 for older kids and 5-to-1 for younger ones.

"In the big churches, you've always got to keep thinking smaller," she said.

Mrs. Saunders said that children's needs are the same as when she started, but the culture has changed considerably, prompting Prestonwood to invest in technology and interactive programming as it teaches the Bible and Christian doctrine.

Not surprisingly, Mrs. Saunders has formulated a philosophy through the years.

"First, I want kids to have fun at church," she said. "If they don't have fun, they don't come back.

"Second, I want them to know they are loved unconditionally, like Christ loves them."

In describing Mrs. Saunders, colleagues speak of her administrative skill, her punishing work schedule and her focus.

"It's never been just a job with her," said Yvonne Valasek, a longtime volunteer in children's ministry at Prestonwood. "It's been a passion for helping boys and girls come to know Jesus."

Mrs. Saunders has no plans for retirement, and that's good news to Dr. Graham, who wants her working away in the building that carries her name.

"Sondra has a blank check with me, and certainly her dedication is as strong and fervent as ever, and her value to the church is immeasurable," he said.

### **SAUNDERS CHILDREN'S BUILDING**

On Sunday at 9:15 a.m., Prestonwood Baptist Church will dedicate its new Saunders Children's Building. It honors Sondra Saunders, the church's senior preschool/children's minister.

#### **Details**

- \$7.5 million price tag
- 30,900 square feet
- 2,500-square-foot "event room"
- 12 classrooms
- 5 additional special-needs classrooms
- Indoor play space
- Harvey Saunders Prayer Suite, named for Mrs. Saunders' late husband

*SOURCE: Prestonwood Baptist Church*