

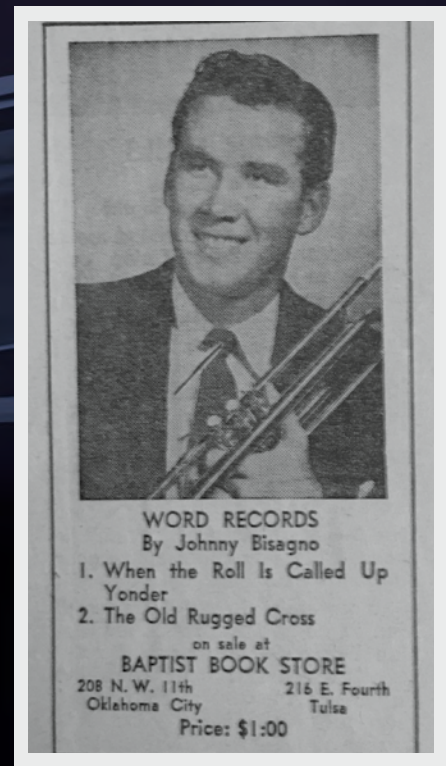
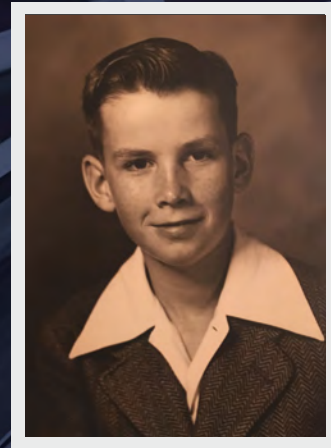


Celebrating the life and legacy of

**Dr. John R. Bisagno**

April 5, 1934–August 5, 2018





## “My Dear People...”

Bro. John Bisagno faithfully rose on Sunday mornings for decades to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and worship our Savior in community with his church family. Early in the morning hours of Sunday, August 5, 2018, he came face-to-face with Jesus and is now worshipping Him at His feet—side-by-side with his beloved Uldine.

## Young Man with a Horn

The path that led Bro. John to full-time ministry did not follow a conventional route. He was born on April 5, 1934, in Augusta, Kansas, and raised in a Christian home by parents Jay and Claire Reese Bisagno. However, at the age of 13, he recalled that he “joined the church and signed a card and was immersed in a baptistry, but nothing happened.”

Before graduating from Perry High School in Perry, Oklahoma, young John discovered his gift of music and became a sought-after trumpet player who played with the likes of Merle Lindsay, Bob Wills, and others. At Oklahoma State University, Johnny Bisagno and his Dixieland Band were the go-to musicians to play at fraternity and sorority dances. He teamed up with a professional Dixieland band during a summer break one year, and between a couple of gigs he headed home to Perry to visit his parents. There, he ran into his pastor from his hometown and he invited a skeptical teenage John to spend a few days at Falls Creek, the largest youth camp in Oklahoma.

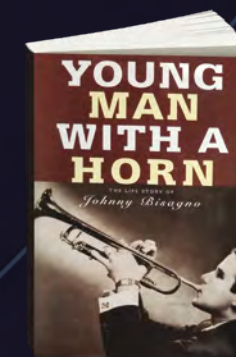
That simple invitation would change the course of his life forever. At Falls Creek on a Friday evening in August 1952 surrounded by twelve thousand other campers, John responded when preacher Charlie Taylor invited them to accept Jesus as their Savior and said, “I don’t care how few come tonight, I want you few to mean business.” John recalls being the first one to walk down the aisle. A preacher greeted him to pray and John gave his heart to Christ, recalling that “I got up from my knees the happiest person in all the world.”

## Anything to Serve

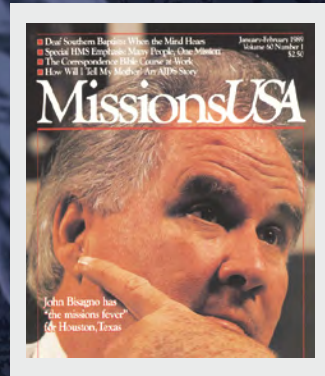
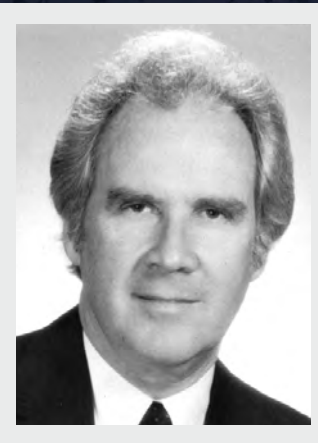
His new-found faith led him to walk away from the entertainment side of the music world, but John would continue to use his musical gifts in revivals during his remaining years in college at Oklahoma Baptist University where he transferred after that pivotal summer. “I would go anywhere, anytime, for anything, for nothing—just to hold a revival. Anything to serve the God I love.” Despite countless miles and hours spent on the road for his budding ministry, he graduated with a Bachelor of Music—just three and one-half years after starting college at the age of 20.

Before leaving Oklahoma Baptist, John met campus beauty queen Uldine Beck. They quickly fell in love and were married on August 27, 1954, eleven months to the day after they met. After graduation, John served as an associate pastor in charge of music and education at First Baptist Church in Sallisaw, Oklahoma. But soon, he realized that evangelism was his true passion and he “was anxious to get out and hit the sawdust trail again.” The young couple embraced the life of a traveling musician leading worship at revivals across the nation and the financial uncertainty that came with it.

Eventually, while traveling in Ireland with evangelist Hyman Appelman in 1959, John felt a significant calling to preach instead of leading music. That’s what he focused his time and energy on until 1965 when he became the pastor of First Southern Baptist Church of Del City, Oklahoma. John put into practice innovative ideas for outreach and connecting with the local community. The church baptized 700 to 800 people each year, and they pioneered the concepts of praise teams and praise bands under John’s leadership.







# “Unanimously Accepted”

Meanwhile, First Baptist Church in downtown Houston was struggling to attract people. Following the resignation of Pastor Robert Smith, a committee was formed to find the next man to lead the historic church. Recommendations were submitted and the entire committee traveled to Oklahoma to hear one of the prospective candidates—Pastor John Bisagno. By secret ballot, the committee unanimously voted to recommend him as the next pastor. On January 11, 1970, the church also voted unanimously in his favor. He “unanimously accepted” the call, and Bro. John Bisagno, age 35, preached his first sermon as the pastor of Houston’s First Baptist Church on February 15, 1970.

# Spreading the Word

Throughout his tenure as pastor, Bro. John continued to focus on evangelical efforts like he had been doing since that life-changing night at Falls Creek. In his first year, he led the church to sponsor SPIRENO (Spiritual Revolution Now), a six-month program of evangelism in city schools, stadiums, and theaters. The effort led to 4,039 salvations. In 1978, the year after moving in to the new building on I-10, the first of many Houston Crusades was held at Delmar Stadium. Bro. John coupled intentional evangelism initiatives such as these with Christian education ministries to provide people with opportunities to grow in their relationship with Jesus and their understanding of the Bible.

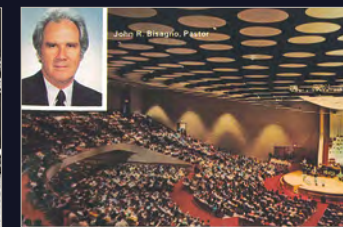
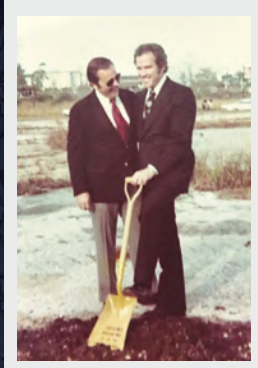


Early on, Bro. John recognized the need for the church to move out of downtown if it wanted to reach more people with the Gospel. He put the vision before the church and on September 24, 1972, 80 percent voted to relocate to I-10 near the new West 610 Loop. Church members pledged \$3.5 million for the new building, but the lowest bid to come back was \$8.1 million. Bro. John asked the church what they wanted to do, and they unanimously decided to move forward with the vision. The Nothing Is Impossible! campaign was put into motion. He later said, “If we just do what we can reasonably do, then we’ll get what we can do. But if we dare to dream and do what God can do, then we’ll get what God can do.”

Bro. John’s powerful preaching and a renewed churchwide focus on evangelism and outreach had a profound impact on the once-stagnant church he came to in 1970. Membership totalled 3,504 in 1969. By the end of his first year as pastor, 2,011 new people joined the church. Membership increased by over 11,000 by his 10th anniversary in 1980, and total membership approached 17,000 by 1985. By the time he retired, Houston’s First had more than 22,000 members and the church had baptized over 15,000 people in the preceding 30 years.

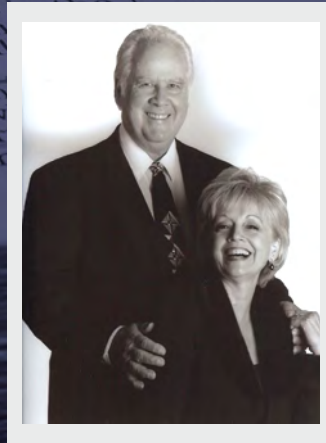
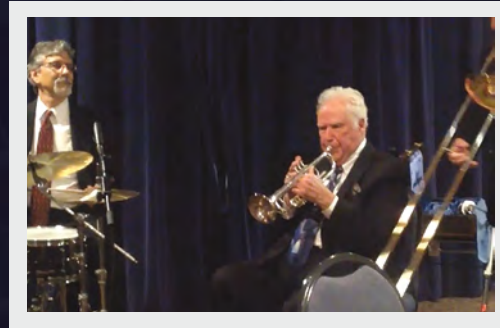
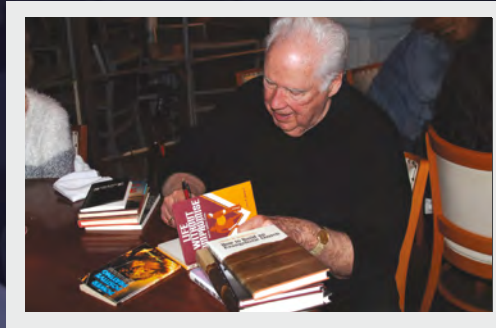
While Bro. John instilled among church members a heart for spreading the Gospel among the people of Houston, he also pointed their attention to the people of the world. He moved the church from a goal of raising \$100,000 each year for world missions in the early '70s to raising \$1 million by 1982. Inspired by his passion, the Houston’s First family gave millions to missions causes during his years as pastor. But beyond financial generosity, others committed their lives to ministry and mission work. More than 500 members went into full-time Christian vocations during his tenure, including more than 100 who left to serve as foreign missionaries.

*“We give our life to Christ not because He demands it but because He deserves it.”*



- Apr 5, 1934 Born in Augusta, Kansas
- May 1951 Graduates from Perry High School
- Fall 1951 Enrolls at Oklahoma State University
- Aug 1, 1952 Accepts Jesus at Falls Creek
- Aug 1952 Transfers to Oklahoma Baptist University
- Aug 27, 1954 Marries Uldine Beck
- May 1955 Graduates from Oklahoma Baptist University
- Dec 8, 1955 Ginger is born
- Late 1959 Feels a call to preach
- Sep 11, 1962 Tim is born
- Oct 21, 1963 Tony is born
- 1965 Becomes Pastor of First Southern Baptist Church, Del City, Oklahoma
- May 1965 Publishes *The Power of Positive Praying*
- Feb 15, 1970 Preaches first sermon at Houston’s First Baptist Church
- Oct 1970–Apr 1971 SPIRENO held across Houston
- 1972 Serves as President of Southern Baptist Convention’s Pastors’ Conference
- Apr 1977 Houston’s First moves to Katy Freeway location
- Aug 1978 Inaugural Houston Crusade held at Delmar Stadium
- Mar 1980 Houston’s First acquires Northwest Academy
- Feb 1984 Houston’s First opens education space and Christian Life Center
- Apr 1991 Houston’s First celebrates church’s 150th anniversary
- Fall 1998 First Baptist Academy and Houston Christian High School open
- June 1999 Announces plans to retire
- Fall 1999 Receives honorary Doctorate from Oklahoma Baptist University



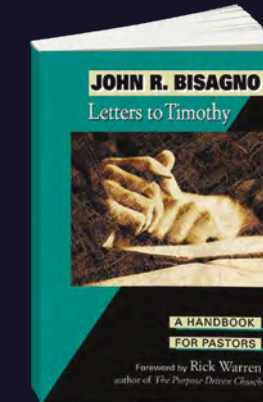


*“I would go anywhere, anytime, for anything, for nothing...Anything to serve the God I love.”*



## Continued Impact

The impact of Bro. John’s passion, leadership, and encouragement reached all other aspects of Houston’s First’s ministry. During his tenure, Pageant became a Christmas tradition, additional education space and the Christian Life Center (now Fitness & Recreation Center) were built, a full-time Counseling ministry was established, the First Place 4 Health program was launched, METRO Bible Study began, and Beth Moore began writing and leading Bible studies. The church acquired Northwest Academy which later became First Baptist Academy and Houston Christian High School—a secondary school founded by several area churches who embraced Bro. John’s vision.



Bro. John announced his plans to retire in the summer of 1999. “This is and has been in the last 30 years the easiest church in the world to pastor,” he told the church family. “Why? Because we have great lay men and women.” Looking ahead, he said that “this church is poised for a new burst of energy.” Bro. John delivered his last sermon at Houston’s First, “Passing the Baton Without Dropping the Ball,” on November 21 of that year. His official last day as pastor was in early 2000 and he became the church’s Pastor Emeritus—exactly 30 years since the young evangelist and pastor from Oklahoma came to town.

At age 65 when he retired, Bro. John continued to preach, teach, and serve as interim pastor at various churches. He published *Letters to Timothy: A Handbook for Pastors* in 2001, billed as “his retirement gift to younger and older pastors alike.” It was one of the many books he published in his lifetime. Despite the health challenges he experienced in recent years, Bro. John was still sharing with others and even had a speaking engagement as recently as the week before the Lord called him home.

As news of his homegoing spread, friends and admirers shared their thoughts and sentiments. They referred to him as a “church innovator” and “true pioneer” whose “winsome humor” and “transparent devotion” to Jesus served as an “inspiring example.” He was “one of the greatest preachers of his or any generation.”

## His First Family

As beloved as Bro. John was by his church family, he was loved first and most by Uldine, his wife of 63 years. She was called home to heaven on September 13, 2017, and was there to greet him when he arrived. Bro. John was a loving father and father-in-law to their three children and their spouses—Ginger and husband Dr. Curt Dodd, Tim and wife Edye, and Tony and wife Dottie. He adored being “Poppy” to his eight grandchildren—Jonathan Dodd and wife Catherine, Zaq Dodd and wife Carlie, Britni Grace Meacham and husband Kristopher, River Bisagno, Rocco Bisagno, AJ Bisagno, Harper Bisagno, and Oliver Bisagno—and his seven great-grandchildren—Charlotte, TJ, and Shepherd Dodd, and Banner, Vivi, Mercy, and Luca Dodd.



- Nov 1999: Preaches last message at Houston’s First
- Feb 2000: Retires from Houston’s First
- May 2007: Falls Creek dedicates John R. Bisagno Auditorium
- Jan 2015: Publishes 50th anniversary edition of *The Power of Positive Praying*
- Sep 13, 2017: Uldine goes home to heaven
- Aug 5, 2018: Bro. John meets Jesus face-to-face—side-by-side with Uldine



