

Keyboard festivals win out over COVID-19 pandemic this year

By Tony Martin

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South

Mississippi Baptists have been sponsoring keyboard festivals for a long time – since 1945, as a matter of fact. “Most Mississippi Baptists don’t even know about them but in my circles, they’re ‘the thing,’” quipped Wyndy South, keyboard contract consultant in the Church Music Department of Mississippi Baptist Convention Board (MBCB) and coordinator of the events.

Even during the present pandemic, the festivals carried on Jan. 28-30 in locations across the state including:

- First Church, Tupelo.
- First Church, West Point.
- First Church, Jackson.
- First Church, Meridian.
- Petal-Harvey Church, Petal.
- First Church, Summit.

- First Church, Pascagoula.
- First Church, Laurel.
- First Church, Senatobia.
- Emmanuel Church, Grenada.
- North Greenwood Church, Greenwood.

“The main idea behind the keyboard festivals is to instill in musicians the encouraging insights into how they can use their piano to serve in a church, how they can use piano at schools, or whatever else they want to do. The festivals help keep them motivated to do that.”

Worship services today require well-rounded musicians, she stressed. “A ‘jack of all trades.’ You have to be able to read chord charts. You have to be able to read music out of the hymnal. You have to be able to play improvisational. Our [Baptist-affiliated] colleges – Blue Mountain College in Blue Mountain, William Carey University in Hattiesburg, and Mississippi College in Clinton – even offer worship majors.”



KEYBOARD FESTIVALS – Sam Wilkerson (right), member of West Ellisville Church, Ellisville, and a group leader at the 2021 Keyboard Festival location at First Church, Laurel, follows along as a festival participant performs on the piano. (Special photo)

The keyboard festivals are planned by South and Slater Murphy, director of the MBCB Church Music Department. The duo is assisted by Mississippi Baptist ministers of music, church pianists, church organists, and music teachers.

South said there are the three goals for the festivals: “Spiritually, we’re trying to instill in participants a relationship with Jesus because they’re getting into the hymns, learning the heritage of hymns and the Scriptures that go with them. That’s not just hymns from the hymnal – it’s any praises to God through music that have been written down. We want to challenge them to be keyboard leaders in their churches, sharing their gifts.”

According to the Keyboard Festival Handbook, the other two objectives are:

– Musically. To encourage the use of keyboard music that is worthy and acceptable for the worship and praise of Christ. To challenge individuals to set goals for greater accomplishments. To offer opportunities for hearing others play the keyboard instruments. To encourage keyboard instructors to teach hymn playing

– Generally. To acquaint our Baptist churches with potential for enlisting young people to develop and use their talents in the ministry of the local church. To encourage greater participation in the associational and state music ministry.

“The coolest thing is to watch the journey of kids,” South said. “In March, I will have finished my 20th year working with the festivals. I’ve been involved for 40 years. When someone in the first grade comes in, and I’m able to help them get a scholarship to William Carey as a high school senior because they’ve played all the way through... I’ve tracked those kids. This is a big thing. It’s been around longer than I have.”

The 2021 festivals were much different than the previous year, South pointed out. “2021 was an exception to every rule that’s ever been made. In 2020, we had not yet had interference from that nasty virus. We had a full slate – 855 kids. We had 11 festivals.

“This year, I got permission from Dr. Murphy, Dr. Michael Lee [MBCB associate executive director for church growth], and Dr. Shawn Parker [MBCB executive director-treasurer] to continue the festivals. We had 500 kids in 10 festivals this year. In every single one of the locations, we had strict COVID-19 protocols in place.

“Dr. Murphy, Dr. Lee, and Dr. Parker were all so instrumental in helping our festivals be a success this year,” South said. “So much has been cancelled, but I really think – I know – that methods and timing may have changed, but God is still busy changing hearts and giving us out-of-the-box

opportunities to praise Him.”

The annual Mississippi Baptist Keyboard Festivals are supported by gifts to the Mississippi Cooperative Program. For more information on the Cooperative Program, visit <https://www.mbc.org/what-is-cp/>.