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In 1986, Charles Wade, then pastor of First Baptist Church in Arlington, baptizes new believers who came to faith in Christ through the apartment Bible studies of Mission Arlington. (Photo courtesy of Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex)

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By George Henson / Special to the Baptist Standard

ARLINGTON—Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex officially began on a Friday 30 years ago when hardly anyone except Tillie Burgin was available at First Baptist Church in Arlington to respond to a need.

She and the ministry she founded have been responding to community needs ever since.



Robert and Tillie Burgin served as missionaries in South Korea, along with their sons, Jim and Rick. After returning to her hometown following missionary service in South Korea, Burgin prayed seven years about how God might use her and her church to meet the needs of people in Arlington.

Do missions in Arlington

“When we returned from South Korea, there was no doubt in my heart that God was prompting me: ‘If you can do missions in Korea, why can’t you do missions in Arlington?’ So, I was trying to interpret that by going from pastors to pastors, and people to people, just praying with them for God’s direction of what that meant,” she explained.

“Finally, one day Dr. Charles Wade (then pastor of First Baptist in Arlington) called and said: ‘Why don’t we try whatever this is that you’re talking about for a year. If it doesn’t work, you can go back to your old job at the schools.’”



Tillie Burgin

On Friday morning, Aug. 1, 1986, Burgin joined the staff of First Baptist Church in Arlington as minister of missions. Her salary for the role—created primarily as part of a Texas Baptist emphasis on church starting—was partly funded by the Baptist General Convention of Texas and Tarrant Baptist Association.

“I didn’t understand all that, because that wasn’t my background,” she said. “Somebody said something about church planting, and I told them, ‘I don’t know what that is.’”

Her “office” was a closet as far away from the main office as physically possible.

She remembers clearly seeing it for the first time.

“When you first see your newborn baby, that child is the most beautiful child you have ever seen in your life. That is how I felt about that little closet,” she said.

Humble beginnings

“It had orange curtains, one bookcase, one desk, one chair and nothing else. No telephone, no pencils, no nothing. But in my heart, it was the most beautiful thing I could experience.

“But like it didn’t take long for my son, Jim, not to be the prettiest baby I’d ever seen, the journey moves on a little bit.”

Since it was Friday, she was one of the few people in the church building. Even the hallways were dark.

That afternoon, a custodian brought Burgin the address of a woman who lived in an apartment and needed financial assistance to get her electricity turned back on.

The woman received the financial help she needed, and she also agreed to hold Mission Arlington’s first Bible study in her apartment.

'We didn't know any better'

“That just sort of happened,” Burgin said. “We never had a goal, never had an objective, never did a survey. When God launched, he launched. We were the most unassuming, ignorant people God could find.

“We didn’t know any better. We didn’t know you couldn’t do church with unsaved, unchurched people in apartments where there was no steeple. We just started a Bible study in that apartment because that’s all I knew.”

She prayed the ministry would be able to start six Bible studies the first year. They started six the first month.

“Apartment people move around a lot, and when they moved, they would say, ‘Come over here,’ because John 3:16 works. They were hearing the gospel as never before, and they were forming their own congregations by inviting their friends,” Burgin said.



That marked the beginning of Mission Arlington, which became a nonprofit organization separate from—but still closely related to—First Baptist Church. It expanded to become Mission Metroplex in 1990 when the ministry started Bible studies and other programs at apartment complexes in neighboring Grand Prairie.

At the end of the first year, Mission Arlington held a celebration in a park with participants of the 12 apartment congregations joining together. Everything went well until a hornet’s nest got stirred up, and several guests had to go to the emergency room with their injuries.

“That’s the last time we did that,” she said. “That’s when we decided we’d better just start having revivals.”

'Get the gospel to the people'

All these years later, the ministry continues to serve as God directs, she said.



Student volunteers work with Rainbow Express, the children's ministry of Mission Arlington. “We laugh when we’re out with our Rainbow Express (children’s ministry) and volunteers say, ‘What if it rains?’ Well, the rain plan is the same as the dry plan,” she said.

“Regardless of what day it is, the plan is the same: Get the gospel to the people, help them understand what it means to have a relationship with Christ, regardless of where they are or who they are. Christ didn’t die for 10 percent of the population. He died for everyone.”

A model for missions and ministry

Many churches across the United States have visited to see how Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex functions so they can take the missions strategy home to meet needs in their own communities.

“That has been happening almost from the beginning,” she said. “Our prayer always is that they can see God. It is not a program. It is not an organization. It is a way of life that God has put together, and you can’t deny it. You also can’t explain it, because you can’t explain God.

“So, our prayer has always been that when they leave this place, they will know they have been in the presence of God and that God has the same plan for every believer, every follower—to multiply.”

From the beginning, Burgin wanted to see the ministry reproduced in other communities, and that commitment has shaped the way it not only developed, but also remained essentially the same.

“One of the reasons we have held on to doing things the way we do (working out of) four old houses back there, is so people can see it is reproducible,” she said. “People have come to us and said, ‘Let us build you a \$8 million building,’ but that is not reproducible. Those four old houses back there are reproducible. So, folks come here and say: ‘Wow, we can do that. We’ve got an old house.’”

Focus on apartment-based Bible studies

The small-group Bible studies in apartment complexes remain the starting points for the various facets of the ministry, said Jim Burgin, communications director for Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex.

“As we were out trying to share Christ’s love, there was such heartache and stress and dysfunction that people couldn’t hear us. You couldn’t just go out and say, ‘Here’s Jesus; we hope you make it.’ For us, authentic faith meant we needed to respond to people’s needs a life at a time,” he explained. “The twin core values for us are to take the church to the people a life at a time.”

As the needs presented themselves, God consistently supplied the means to meet those needs, he said. Last year, Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex provided emergency assistance to more than 140,000 people.

Expanding scope of ministry

The ministry includes a medical clinic that supplied \$1.19 million in free health care and \$1.59 million in free medication to more than 3,700 people last year and a dental clinic that provided close to \$1.5 million in services to more than 1,500 people.

It also includes a Christmas store that helped more than 30,500 people last year, Thanksgiving meal deliveries to more than 25,000 people, a summer lunch program at six sites that served 500 children and a program to provide school supplies for more than 9,000 students.

Last year, Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex recorded 2,664 spiritual commitments.

It takes more than 2,500 volunteers each week to keep the ministry going. More than 100 churches and organizations now contribute to the ministry.

'This is God's place, not ours'

“It has just grown and grown, and it is over our heads,” Jim Burgin said. “This is God’s place, not ours. That is why we want so much for him to get credit and glory.

“Every day, prayer is a central part of what we do. We don’t market. We don’t have grant writers. We just allow the Lord to provide, and he has done well.

“We are so grateful to the support we have received from so many churches from across the denominational spectrum,” he said. “The Baptist General Convention of Texas has also been with us from the beginning, and we are so grateful for the support. Texas Baptists have come together to support this ministry and the spread of the gospel in so many ways, it is impossible to count.

“We are just grateful to God and his faithful people. Many have never been here, but they have been a part of this ministry through their cooperative giving.”

Give thanks for God's faithfulness

To mark the 30th anniversary of Mission Arlington/Mission Metroplex, Burgin just asks churches to thank God for all he has done through the ministry and perhaps show a short [video](#) that has been produced to commemorate the milestone.

“The best birthday gift we feel like we could have would be for God to be glorified in this third decade and for people to pray for us,” he said. “Prayer is how we began and is at the heart of how we want to continue.”

Among the Christians praying for the ministry will be the 349 small-group Bible studies Mission Arlington started, totaling almost 8,000 people.

“There’s been a lot of history, a lot of fun, a lot of tears, but always God has been so faithful,” Tillie Burgin said.

“He’s allowed us to work hard and have a lot of perseverance. We’re open seven days a week. We don’t close. Our passion is as strong today as it was 30 years ago.”