

Tillie Burgin: Saying Yes to Jesus



by [Alison Dellenbaugh](#) on April 14, 2023

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If you've ever been to [Mission Arlington](#) in Arlington, Texas, you've likely seen its founder and Executive Director, Tillie Burgin. The organization operates 364 days a year, and Tillie, now 86, is there daily from the wee hours in the morning until night, directly serving and ministering to people and working harder than anyone else around. When a couple of us went to interview her for this article, she apologized for being a few minutes late to her office, noting, "You got me out of the dumpster."

Learning to say yes to God earlier in her life (Luke 11:28) prepared Tillie for the big "Yes" she has been living out for nearly 37 years at Mission Arlington / Mission Metroplex, headquartered just a block from where Tillie was born.

SAYING YES TO FOLLOWING JESUS

At 9 or 10 years of age, Tillie Lester was sitting near the back at First Baptist Church of Arlington, which was temporarily meeting at Arlington High School after a fire. Her father was a Methodist who could rarely attend church because he was busy running a service station. Her mother didn't go to church often, either, because of health issues, but faithfully sent Tillie and her sister. The sisters didn't choose to sit together, though! Every week, the church had an altar call. Tillie wasn't sure what the preacher was asking people when they went to the front, and figured she'd get it wrong. But that day during the altar call, she noticed a woman at the end of her row nodding to her, so she responded by going down the aisle. What the preacher asked was, "Do you trust Jesus?" She had a good answer for that: Yes!

It took a little longer to understand the importance of that "yes." Tillie says she liked church because she got more attention there than anywhere else. But for a while, she would sometimes show up to church to have her attendance noted, then walk right up the aisle and out the back door and leave! One day, as she was walking up the aisle intending to do just that, she looked up at the cross above the baptistery and realized Jesus had died for her. Touched, she found a seat on a pew and sat through the rest of the service. At that moment, Jesus and her faith became profoundly real to her, and her life was changed.

LEARNING TO FOLLOW GOD'S PLAN

As she grew up, Tillie continued being very involved in the church. "I had a little bit of a maverick spirit," she says, noting that she'd sometimes get a football and play at the church on Sunday afternoons. She began reading the Bible and went through the youth department and Girls' Auxiliary.

When she finished high school, Tillie was dating a student at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, and planned to follow him there. But on graduation night she prayed, thinking it was a safe prayer, "Lord, if you really don't want me to go to Hardin-Simmons... let me get an award or something." She says, "I knew that wasn't going to happen." However, it did! The school gave an unprecedented second Rotary award, which she received and which provided a scholarship to go to college in town. Regardless, says Tillie, "I thought 'no way!' I immediately gave the award away to somebody that would go to UTA—it was Arlington State College then—and I went on to Hardin-Simmons!" Tillie had to work at a café to earn her tuition but got fired from that job, and two or three months after starting

school, she ended up hitchhiking home to Arlington. Then her family had to pay tuition for her to go to Arlington State. Tillie was learning it worked better to follow God's plan instead of her own.

In Arlington, Tillie got a job as secretary of First Baptist Church, and quickly met Bob Burgin in history class at college. When Bob showed up at the church one of her first Sundays back, she had to show him the way to the college class. On her way back from dropping him off there, she prayed, "Lord, if you ever intend for me to marry anybody, this is probably the one." He asked her out to lunch the same day. She sent him home after lunch, as she already had another date scheduled for that afternoon. But Bob called wanting to see her again that night, so when her date showed up at the door to take her to the opera, she turned him away in order to see Bob again.

As Bob and Tillie dated, Bob realized he wasn't a Christian. Growing up, his church didn't have a regular preacher and he'd only gone there occasionally. One day, Bob said he was leaving his job and going to his hometown of Jewett. Tillie thought he was breaking up with her. "I thought the world had come to an end," she says. Seeing how upset she was, her mother asked, "Where's all that faith you talk about all the time?" Tillie sat on the couch and began to sing to God. Soon, Bob called and said, "I've accepted Jesus." He had gone to see a man he knew who led him to the Lord. She and Bob were married within a year of meeting, in September 1956.

SAYING YES TO MISSION

Growing up, Tillie had always volunteered to be a missionary. Every time they'd ask who would go, she would say, "Send me!" At that time, they said no. But in 1957, a few months after Bob and Tillie got married, Bob was drafted into the Army. During his training, Tillie was finishing her bachelor's in education at North Texas State (now UNT) and would go be with him on weekends. Then Bob was sent to Korea.

They attempted to get Tillie sent to go with him, as a missionary. The Baptist mission board said no, but the Methodists said yes. But first she had to have her diploma so she could teach. Her graduation was two days after the plane was leaving. She went to the college president's office, where the secretary said there was no way she could talk to the president or get her diploma early. Just then, the president came out of his office and Tillie asked him directly. Not only did she get her diploma, but the school officials put on their academic regalia and did a small graduation service for her right there.

Bob and Tillie moved to Seoul, Korea, and lived there for 16 months. Tillie taught school while there. When she left Korea, the students asked her to please send someone else to teach them about Jesus. The same night she returned to Arlington, the mayor S.J. Stovall, who was also her Sunday School director, asked Tillie to speak about her experiences in Korea to the Sunday School department. When she did, she made an appeal for people to go there on mission, like she'd promised the students. As she continued speaking about it to others and passing on the same appeal, she began to feel perhaps the message was for her and she should go back. It bothered her enough that she thought she should quit speaking!

One Sunday when the invitation was given at church, Tillie felt the familiar leading to go back to Korea on mission. She prayed, "Lord, if You really intend for this to happen, it's got to come from Bob." On the way home from church, Bob pulled the car over and asked, "Do you ever think the Lord might be

calling us to go back to Korea as missionaries?” Tillie said absolutely not! But once again, “the Lord had a plan,” and

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At first, the Burgins didn't qualify, as Bob was not a pastor. To become an evangelist, he went to one year of seminary. Tillie could do home and school ministry with her education degree. In 1965, she filled out a mission application and put her first choice of location as South Korea, and second and third choices both as Arlington, Texas. The Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board called and said she had misunderstood. Tillie said, “No, sir, if it's not Korea, it's Arlington.” At their commissioning ceremony, Tillie was told it was a commission to Korea for a lifetime. She replied, “No, sir, it's to the Lord Jesus Christ for a lifetime.” Already, the Lord was planting seeds for her future ministry.

Appointed in 1966, the Burgins moved to Korea with their sons Rick and Jim, then aged 3 and 6. After five years, they returned to Arlington for a year of furlough, and their son Rick was diagnosed with a parasite in his brain and given less than a 10% chance to live. Providentially, the doctor who performed Rick's 5-6 hour surgery was from Costa Rica and had seen this parasite once before, so he knew how to operate safely. Rick was in the hospital for three weeks, but survived. After their furlough, the Burgins returned to Korea for more mission work, but eventually returned to the U.S. due to Rick's continued health problems. Today, Rick is chaplain of the local police department and Jim is the pastor of Grace Street Fellowship.

SAYING YES TO STARTING MISSION ARLINGTON

Moving back to Arlington presented new opportunities for Tillie. She worked for the local school district as a teacher, consultant, and Director of Personnel. Bob also worked as a teacher and school administrator. Tillie also started working part-time for First Baptist, in missions, while still working for the schools. Meanwhile, she had the recurring thought, *“If you can do missions in Korea, why can't you do missions in Arlington?”*

Tillie and friends prayed about that for seven years. She got the idea for Mission Arlington and shared it with everyone she could think of—different churches, associations, etc. Nobody understood it at the time. Tillie kept saying there were more people outside the walls of the church than inside it, but people didn't understand her vision of “taking church to the people.” Finally Charles Wade, who was pastor of First Baptist, said, “Let's try it for a year and see what it is.” People started showing up to help. “Folks who were just sitting on the pews not doing anything, they were ripe for it.”

In August of 1986, the month that Tillie turned 50, Mission Arlington started with ministry in apartments, with small congregations meeting to worship and study the Bible where the people lived. They also provided assistance from the beginning, and the ministry took off quickly. They are still working in the same apartments they started in, and as of 2022 they had 360 congregations around the area, averaging 3800 people per week in all, reaching a total of 7800 people.

Also in 2022, they offered after-school care for 2568 students, school supplies for 9000 students, and emergency food assistance for 180,696 people, as well as medical and dental services for thousands, transportation services, furniture and household supplies, family festivals, and a free Christmas Store

helping 6420 families, among other services. An average of 550 people a day come to Mission Arlington for help.

But despite all the physical help they offer, the organization remains first and foremost a ministry, founded on prayer and the Bible, conducted in the name of Jesus and with an “evangelistic heart” to reach each person with God’s love. In 2022, they saw 820 salvations and 706 rededications to Christ. As Tillie continues to put Jesus first and say “yes” to Him in every aspect of Mission Arlington’s ministry, He continues to bless the community greatly through their work.



Tillie Burgin and [Method Bigirimana](#) moving boxes at the Mission Arlington Christmas Store

SAYING YES EVERY DAY

In order to say yes to God daily, Tillie depends on “the presence of the power of the Holy Spirit... every hour of every day.” She relies on Him in making decisions, prioritizing God over other things. “As you mature, it becomes more clear. You get such a desire to be with Him, study His Word... I do it standing up, I do it going, I don’t have to sit in place. He talks more as you go.” And go she does!

Tillie puts a premium on “reaching out to anybody... just a touch.” She prays, “Just give me someone to touch.” Every day at 8:00 am, Mission Arlington holds a devotional time and she listens and looks, watching the people who come to the front room, whether there are 10 or 30 or more, “looking for that person God has ready.” Recently she saw a 5-year-old boy who had come to get food and was praying. “The joy of that,” she says, “You can’t replace it.”

Saying yes to Jesus has taught Tillie to persevere despite obstacles, knowing that if she follows Christ’s lead, she is heading in the right direction. It’s also taught her to lead others to say “yes.” God has used her example and her servant leadership to transform communities and thousands of lives, one person at a time. And Tillie isn’t done growing closer to God or saying yes to Him: “I want to mature until the day I meet Him face to face.”

About the Author

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