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## KEY CHURCHES: Missions growth unlocked

**By Toby Druin**

*Editor Emeritus*

Since 1980, churches affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas have averaged more than 200 church starts a year—a total of 4,624 congregations in a convention that today has only slightly more than 4,300 churches (not counting the 1,400 missions).

While some of the new congregations have not succeeded, many others have, and some are sponsoring new churches of their own.



The impetus for new churches in 1980 and today is the burgeoning growth that has propelled the Lone Star State to second among the 50 states in total population. More than 10 million of the 21 million people who now call Texas home are unchurched.

Bill Pinson, BGCT executive director from 1982 to 2000, pushed the convention to start churches to reach the unchurched and to ensure that Texas remained a strong base for missions outreach.

But the idea that more than anything helped Texas Baptists begin

thousands of congregations was the Key Church concept, born in the missions-starting mind of J.V. Thomas, who headed church starting efforts for the BGCT from 1969 to 1992.

To become a Key Church in Texas, a church had to elevate missions starting to the same priority as its music and education programs, hiring a full-time minister of missions if it had full-time ministers of music and education. The BGCT partnered with the churches in paying the salary of the minister of missions on a declining basis for three years. In return, the Key Church agreed to start at least six missions a year, develop an evangelism strategy and start new ministry activities.

By most observers' calculations, more than half the missions or churches started in Texas during the last 20 years have been the result of the Key Church movement, and Texas has far outdistanced other states in church starts during the period.

The Key Church movement spread from Texas to other states through the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board, which hired Thomas in 1992. He retired from the HMB in 1996.

In 1995, there were 263 Key Churches in the SBC, most of them in Texas, and the 212 that filed reports started 262 congregations and were sponsoring 887 missions. Total attendance in Bible study in the missions and new churches was 33,807 (an average of 38) and 127,474 in the sponsoring churches. In addition to the new missions and churches, 396 new ministries were started, and Key Churches baptized 6,617 people—more than were baptized in any single state convention except Alabama, Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Texas.

Tim Ahlen, pastor of Forest Meadow Baptist Church in Dallas, collaborated with Thomas in a book about the strategy, “One Church: Many Congregations.” He quoted church growth expert Lyle Shaller who said

Southern Baptists had done a number of things for God's kingdom, but the most important had been developing the Key Church strategy.

In Baptist polity, churches start churches. State and national conventions traditionally have worked through associations in relating to local congregations. The Key Church strategy departed from that tradition.

“For the convention, Key Church is a strategy that allows the denomination to work directly with churches that will make a high commitment to starting new churches,” Thomas explained. “It is the only strategy where the convention works directly with a local church and gives the convention an opportunity to train and equip a church to start other churches.

“For the church, it is a way to reach people outside the church walls on the same basis they do evangelism and Bible study. It turns a church loose to double their attendance in three years, moving to a more indigenous leadership basis and not limited to a particular kind of space in starting new units.”

The concept evolved out of several strategies. Thomas said little was being accomplished in the way of starting churches for several years when in the early 1970s he tried to get every church that started a church to start another one.

“I had looked at many church budgets,” he said, “and saw that most often after a church had started a mission and it had constituted as a church that the sponsoring church put the money that had been going to the mission back into its budget. I wanted them to use the money to start another church.”

About the same time, cell churches were beginning to catch on in other denominations, so he promoted a Southern Baptist version of it that became known as the “indigenous satellite unit” or ISU.

“The idea, again, was to get churches to start several others,” Thomas said.

The best way to get Baptists to do anything, he said, is to show them a successful model. He approached Joel Gregory, then pastor at Gambrell Street Baptist Church in Fort Worth, about using Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary students to start house churches in the areas near the seminary. Soon, a half-dozen house churches were under way with assistance from funds provided by the Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas missions.

“The work done by Gambrell Street Baptist Church was the hub of it,” Thomas said. “The Key Church movement began with that.”

The term “Key Church” was born in discussions in 1983 regarding Mission Texas, one of Pinson's early efforts to boost the number of churches in the state, Thomas recalled.

Many churches began to pick up on the idea, including First Baptist Church of Dallas, which had more than 30 missions; First Baptist Church of Oak Cliff; Cliff Temple Baptist Church in Dallas; First Baptist Church of Houston; Lakeland Baptist Church of Lewisville and others. Many already were involved in missions, but the Key Church concept provided new support.

Charles Wade, who succeeded Pinson as executive director of the BGCT in 2000, said he heard the Key Church concept explained at a meeting where Ben Smith, pastor at Lakeland, detailed how his church was using it.

Wade, then pastor of First Baptist Church of Arlington, liked what he heard and recommended the church use funds that had been going to a radio broadcast of worship services to get it started. Tillie Burgin became director of Mission Arlington, which has spawned hundreds of other missions in Arlington and has been emulated across the state and nation.

“Without a doubt, the Key Church strategy has been the most significant church-starting idea Baptists have ever implemented,” Wade said.

“A Baptist church prioritizes something by putting money into it, staffing it and putting it on the church calendar,” Thomas said. “We worked hard at getting churches to put on a missions staff member.”

However, many dropped the salaried position when the BGCT funds ceased. In many cases, a volunteer stepped in and kept up the excitement of starting churches.

Lakeside Baptist Church in Dallas has been involved in the Key Church program since 1986 and has had three ministers of missions. Jim Burgin, who later headed the Key Church program for the BGCT and now works with Mission Arlington, was the first. Gary Wagener has headed the missions effort the last eight years.

“We started it with the BGCT funding part of the salary and then used funds from the (SBC) North American Mission Board for insurance,” said Pastor James McGlothlin. “But we have been responsible for it since then. It has enabled us to do many things. We now are working with about 24 churches in nine different languages.

“The Key Church strategy has given a traditional church a way to be non-traditional without interrupting the fellowship of the traditional church,” he explained. “We are reaching more people with the gospel than at any time in our history.”

Herb Pedersen, pastor at First Baptist Church of Oak Cliff in Dallas and later director of the BGCT's missions division, is now pastor of Longbranch Baptist Church near Midlothian, the last of the missions started by the Oak Cliff church during his pastorate. He has seen the Key Church strategy from several angles.

A pivotal thing about the strategy, he said, was it elevated church starting to the same level of other church programs and thus received greater significance and financial support.

“But the absolute key,” he said, “was in having the right minister of missions. We brought on Aubrey Patterson to direct our missions program, and it was a great experience. We began to look at unchurched people groups in the community and targeted those nobody else was reaching. At one time, we had 22 mission sites. Eleven were church-type missions that became churches, and some of them now are sponsoring new churches. The others were indigenous satellite units that functioned like a church but we never expected them to become self-supporting.

"I think the Key Church strategy was the prime mover as far as starting churches," Pedersen said. "We are carrying it on at Longbranch and are in the process of starting a new church on land just south of Midlothian. It will be a satellite of our church at first with services on Sunday night in Mountain Peak Elementary School. I will preach, and we will use our church staff, but we have assigned a recent seminary graduate to work in the area."

Charles Lee Williamson, director of the BGCT missions division from 1968 to 1992, said one of the principal benefits of the Key Church strategy was in raising the awareness of the importance of starting missions, especially in many mid-sized churches that never had seen church starting as a possibility before.

“Even where a church didn't go into the whole Key Church program,” he said, “the fact of them hearing about it and reading the promotional materials that made the case for missions being on the same level as other church programs kicked up the level of awareness and participation. Missions became something other than a periodic offering promotion.”

James Semple, director of the BGCT State Missions Commission from 1989 to 2001, said the strategy helped churches have a new vision.

“Too often, we get set in our ways, and the Key Church strategy opened our eyes to the possibility of starting new congregations, of having a person on the church staff who could help us do it,” he said. “It was a fabulous concept.”

Jim Burgin, who led the Key Church strategy for the BGCT for three years and now works at Mission Arlington, said the strategy “is still the engine that drives mission starting around the country, although I am concerned that I don't hear as much about it these days.”

Under his leadership at the BGCT, Key Church was changed from more than a church starting strategy aimed at larger churches to involve the minister of missions in administering a missions program for the church at all levels—international and national missions involvement, missions ministries and missions organizations.

“We went from the idea that was ingrained that a Key Church was just for large churches to it being for every church, that a layperson could be the minister of missions and that every church could be a Key Church. The current concept that every church should be a 'missional church' is really positive in that it is trying to capture the idea that every church is a church on mission.”

Mildred Minatrea, associate coordinator of missional church strategy, currently directs the Key Church program for the BGCT.

Starting new churches is still a major focus of the program, he said, with 132 of the 264 church starts in the state in 2002 begun by Key Churches.

The program, however, now also includes age level mission education, a focus on penetrating a community through ministry and involving people in

missions globally. Key Churches were involved in mission efforts in 29 countries last year, he said.

The 207 Key Churches in Texas last year had 130 full-time ministers of missions and registered 941 professions of faith in churches and more than 3,000 in community ministries. The goal, Minatrea said, is to increase the number of Key Churches from one for 77,000 people in the state to one for 50,000.

For more information about becoming a Key Church, contact Minatrea at (888) 747-7700 or [minatrea@bgct.org](mailto:minatrea@bgct.org).

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