

West Texas deaf church has worldwide ministry

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BIG SPRING—[Blessed Hands Baptist Deaf Church](#) hopes not only to minister to the nonhearing population of Big Spring but to reach the world.

Big Spring is home to the [Southwest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf](#)—believed to be the world’s only two-year college for the deaf.

“So, people from all over the world come here to Big Spring,” said Mark Lindsey, pastor of [First Baptist Church in Big Spring](#).



Jim Walterhouse, pastor of Blessed Hands, delivers a signed sermon to his congregation. The school serves about 170 students—20 of them international students. But Big Spring’s deaf population is larger than most communities its size because many students stay in the area after graduation.

Several local churches have offered sign interpretation for the deaf in worship services, but First Baptist saw the need for a church specifically for the deaf.

“It wasn’t really working,” Lindsey acknowledged. “Knowing that

interpreters weren't going to reach those kids and reach this community, we realized we needed a pastor who understood their culture to be able to reach them."

"God was moving" at the collegiate institute's Baptist Student Ministry, his wife, Sherry observed.

"It has always been a healthy, vibrant BSM. So when you see what God is doing there, but it is not reflected in the churches, you know because of that gap—that there is a group of people who are seeking. And we've got to do something to try and reach that group," she said.

Meeting to pray

In 2011, Baptists in the region who were interested in ministry to the deaf met and began praying about the possibility of a deaf church.

"What we prayed was: 'God, there is somewhere right now a family that you're speaking to. Their hearts are leading them to come here. A deaf pastor and his family—you're speaking to them. Just show us who it is,'" recalled Bill Johnson, minister of missions at First Baptist Church in Midland.

Jim Walterhouse, pastor of a deaf church in McAllen and a tutor for deaf students at South Texas College there, visited Big Spring to speak at a student event at the institute in September 2011.

While driving home, he asked his wife, Debbie, "Do you see what great possibilities there are with those deaf young people—the opportunity to train missionaries while they are in school?"

"We went back home with a vision in our minds," Walterhouse said.

When the institute's BSM directorship opened, the vacancy created a unique opportunity.

“Jim was perfectly equipped to fill both positions”—BSM director and founding pastor of a church for the deaf, said John McCullough, director of missions for [Crossroads Baptist Association](#).

God’s timing

West Texas Baptists recognized God’s timing. “It was the coming together in the body of Christ around the school and the BSM,” Johnson said. “All of us saw the potential of the young people. There was a working of the Holy Spirit saying, ‘Now is the time.’”

Blessed Hands Baptist Deaf Church met the first time Easter morning 2012.

“We found morning wasn’t the best time for church when you are trying to reach college students, because they tend not to wake up until the afternoon,” Walterhouse said.

So, the church changed the time of its Sunday worship service to 2 p.m.

“Our attendance doubled almost overnight,” he noted.

Walterhouse wants the church to make disciples who will bless the world.

“Our church is the only deaf church from Fort Worth to New Mexico and from Lubbock to San Antonio. There are some churches with interpretive ministries, but most deaf people want a deaf church with a deaf pastor,” he said.

“From Day One, our vision has been to have a regional church with Big Spring as our Jerusalem, because the school is here. Then we can begin to reach out to Midland, Odessa and the other cities around here where there are deaf folks who need Christ.

“We want to train missionaries. We have young people coming to us from

around the United States and around the world. It is our hope and desire that they'll not only accept Christ, but be disciplined and trained so they can go back as missionaries to their home cities, home states and home countries."

Multiple partners

Blessed Hands exists thanks to the cooperation of multiple partners, Johnson noted.

"It took all our churches, the help of the associations, God bringing all of us together to make this happen. And it has global implications," he said.

The church is supported financially by the [Baptist General Convention of Texas](#), First Baptist Church of Big Spring, Hillcrest Baptist Church in Big Spring, [First Baptist Church in Midland](#), Crossroads Baptist Association and [Basin Baptist Network](#).

John Silva, BGCT church-starting strategist for West Texas, was key to the process, Johnson pointed out.

"John helped us all along the way. We didn't know where to go and what to do to make this happen. We just knew God was moving and working in our hearts. John laid out the steps for us to make this happen," he said.

Deaf people need their own churches to become disciplined and equipped for leadership, Walterhouse said.

"The way you develop deaf missionaries and deaf deacons and deaf Sunday school teachers is through a deaf church. It will not normally happen in an interpretive ministry," he said.

Culturally different

"Discipleship requires a leader, someone to show them the way, and deaf

people and hearing people are culturally different.”

Differences are reflected in worship style, he observed.

“Our worship involves the whole body. Sign language is not just the hands. It involves the whole body. We clap our hands and we dance when we sing,” Walterhouse said.

Danny Campbell, acting provost at Southwest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf, had been praying more than 30 years for a deaf church in Big Spring.

“I’ve seen the need for so long in deaf students who come here from all around the world. Most of them grew up in hearing families. So, if they went to church, they didn’t understand anything. We now have the opportunity that we’ve missed for so many years of teaching them and explaining to them about Jesus, and then sending them back as missionaries to their homes, communities and countries,” he said.

A [North American Mission Board](#) publication recently reported the Southern Baptist Convention has a goal of starting 100 deaf churches in the next 10 years, Walterhouse noted.

Training the laborers

“My first thought was, ‘Where are we going to find 100 deaf pastors?’ Right now, we don’t have 100 deaf pastors in our training schools. Knowing that, what better place could there be for training deaf pastors than right here in Big Spring?” he said.

“The need is so great. Jesus said, ‘Pray for laborers,’ but the laborers need to be trained.”

Walterhouse makes no claim to have planted Blessed Hands Baptist Deaf Church.

“I like to say the church was already planted when I came here. The seed had already been planted. When we came here to see if this was where God was calling us, it was obvious that this was of God,” he said.

“This church was planted many, many years ago through the prayers of the saints. It was watered for many years through those who taught at the BSM and ministered to the deaf in the churches before. We just got the opportunity to walk in and reap the harvest of all the work that had gone on before.”