

The Burgin Family: Missionaries, educators, inspirations

May 14, 2019

The Burgin family, founders of [Mission Arlington](#), have been a significant influence in the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex for decades. Theirs is a unique profile in the Deep in the Hearts of Texans column because they responded as a family, as seen in the different points of view throughout their interview.

From deep in the heart of one Texas family, they share their background and thoughts on ministry and missions. To suggest a Baptist General Convention of Texas-affiliated leader to be featured in this column, or to apply to be featured yourself, [click here](#).

Family background

When did the family begin working at Mission Arlington?

If you think of Mission Arlington as an organization, then we started here about 32 years ago—beginning Aug. 1, 1986. On the other hand, if you think of Mission Arlington as a way of life, then the family has been immersed in this ministry since the mid-1960s when Bob and Tillie moved with their two boys—Jim and Rick—to South Korea as Southern Baptist missionary teachers.

Where else did Tillie and Bob work, and what were their positions?

Tillie and Bob began their careers as educators in Arlington. Tillie served as a special education consultant and in other roles before becoming the director of personnel for Arlington Independent School District. Bob served as a teacher and an administrator in Arlington, before moving to Dallas Baptist University to train future teachers and administrators.

Where did they grow up?

The seventh of eight children, Bob grew up in Jewett, Texas, a farming community of about 1,100 people in Leon County. Tillie grew up in Arlington, the daughter of Erman Lester, the owner and proprietor of a busy “full-service” gas station.

At the time, Arlington was a sleepy bedroom community of 4,000 people between Dallas and Fort Worth. Bob and Tillie met at Arlington State College (subsequently the University of Texas at Arlington) and married in 1956 at Arlington’s First Baptist Church.



Photo courtesy of the Burgin family

Jim and Rick were born in 1960 and 1963, respectively, and both men serve in the ministry today.

Erman Lester's Gulf Station, in part, formed the spirit of service that still lives at Mission Arlington today.

How did they come to faith in Christ?

Tillie's childhood home was purchased by the church in the 1940s. Former pastor Henard East joked with the congregation one Sunday that the Lesters had slept in the sanctuary more than anyone else. Tillie's dad was a Methodist who didn't attend much because the service station was open most Sundays, but Tillie's mom Bonnie made sure that Tillie and her sister were there without fail.

Even as a young girl, Tillie's strong and independent spirit often got her in trouble. One Sunday, the exasperated pastor of First Baptist had to stop the message because Tillie was using a compact mirror to shine light into his eyes.

Some years later, the light shining off the cross in the sanctuary caught Tillie's attention. She looked at that cross and suddenly realized the stories were all true. Jesus had died for her. Tillie was 9 years old when she accepted the Lord.

Bob grew up in the Sardis Baptist Church of Jewett but accepted Christ in a revival setting at the Friendship Baptist Church just outside of town.

Where were they educated, and what degrees did they receive?

Bob and Tillie both graduated with degrees in education from Arlington State College (now UTA) and masters' degrees from North Texas State in Denton.

About ministry

Describe how you were called to start and continue leading Mission Arlington.



Rick Burgin and Jim Burgin (Photo courtesy of the Burgin family)

When we came home in 1978, Tillie couldn't get away from the question, "If you can do missions in Korea, why can't we do missions in Arlington?"

Tillie and Bob prayed for seven years and asked others to join them. By 1986, several small prayer teams were meeting weekly in homes across the city.

The First Baptist Church of Arlington heard the call, too, and Tillie began as the minister of missions there on a Friday, Aug. 1, 1986.

A woman and her son had a financial need that day, and Tillie made a home visit. Bob and Tillie paid the electric bill and asked the woman if she would host a Bible study in her apartment on a Sunday morning. Seventeen people attended the first day, and God's vision increased.

The hope was to have six apartment Bible studies started in a year, but that many doors opened in a week. Over a couple of months, more than 300 people were attending these small communities of faith, and a movement

was born.

Please tell us about the breadth and nature of your work, including its mission.

Every life matters to our Lord, and therefore to us. We desire to treat each person with dignity and respect and believe that the physical and spiritual sides to our ministry function as an integrated whole.

With 2,500 volunteers each week and hundreds of people daily coming through our front doors, we still consider ourselves a “ministry of ones” because every life matters to our Lord.

With respect to the form our ministry takes, we know that it takes four working tires to get a car down the road. If one is flat, no matter how resilient the rest of the tires might be, the car isn’t going to move. Over time, the Lord has developed many avenues for ministry here which meet the physical, emotional, educational and social needs of people. These four key dimensions work together in all of our work.

Finally, four important scriptures focus our call: John 3:16, Matthew 25:40, Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 1:8.

What aspect(s) of Mission Arlington and/or its mission do you wish more people understood?

Mission Arlington is an example of the New Testament church at work.

How has Mission Arlington and its mission changed since its beginning, and what changes do you expect in the next 10 to 20 years?

Our ministry has changed over time—and may continue to change—but our mission has stayed the same and will remain the same.

Name the three most significant challenges and/or influences facing your institution.

1. Getting Christians in traditional churches out of the pews and into the fields.
2. The fields are white unto harvest, but the workers are few.
3. Resources for the work.

What one aspect of your job gives you the greatest joy or fulfillment?

Seeing people saved and baptized.

About Tillie

Who were/are your mentors, and how did/do they influence you?

Sunday school teachers, Girls in Action leaders and my grandmother Lucy Olds from New Boston, who read the Bible to me as a little girl.

Other than the Bible, name some of your favorite books or authors, and explain why.

Jim Cymbala, because of his passion for the gospel.

What is your favorite Bible verse or passage? Why?

John 3:16. The most important word in this passage is "whosoever," for every life has value to God, and no one can ever be thrown away.

Who is your favorite Bible character, other than Jesus? Why?

Peter, because of his passion to follow Christ.

Name something about you that would surprise people who know you well.

I used to play to trumpet. People didn't call me "hot lips" for no reason.

If you could get one "do over" in your career, what would it be, and why?

I haven't always done it right or well, but I have no regrets.

What would you like to say to Texas Baptists?

Over 32 years ago—led by God's Spirit—Texas Baptists invested financial resources to help Mission Arlington get started, and they have continued to provide support through the years. God's kingdom family has been impacted because of the vision and faithfulness of God's people across this state, and we are grateful. Thank you.