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Interview of Bill Richardson

Bill Richardson

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HARDING COLLEGE LIVING HISTORY OF MISSIONS

This is Volume II, Number 3 of the Harding College Living History of Missions. I am Joe Hacker. Today is October 26, 1970. I am interviewing Bill Richardson who has served for a number of years as an evangelist in the field of Holland.

Hacker: Brother Richardson, could you give us a brief historical outline of the work as you have experienced it in Holland from the beginning to date?

Richardson: Brother Hacker, the work began in Holland in 1946 when two evangelists, Brother Jacob C. Vandervis, who was a native of Holland but had lived in this country for about 20 years, went to Haarlem near Amsterdam and began the work. I joined them a year later in 1947. Since that time, I would say we have probably averaged having three evangelists in this field of some 13 million people. There are four congregations there: one in Haarlem, one in Amsterdam, one in The Hague and one in Utrecht. At the present time we only have, I believe, two full-time American missionaries working in Holland.

Hacker: The work there has progressed with some distinction in certain areas. Could you analyze briefly the growth of the church as you recall its development?

Richardson: The growth of the church in the early years was very rapid, whatever the causes were. It may have been because of the benevolent program. It may have been partly that and partly other factors, but after the benevolent part of the work was stopped in 1950, the work did slow down. Perhaps one of the reasons for the up and down nature of the work--it has flourished at times and it has tapered off at times--was when Dutch evangelists had been supported and for whatever reason when support was discontinued problems arose which always hurt our work seriously.

Hacker: What is your opinion now of supporting national evangelists? Under what circumstances do you feel they should be supported and by what means?

Richardson: This is strictly a personal opinion. I think that most of us who have been in mission fields look at it a little differently for one way or another. I feel that we should just about have to continue supporting the ones that are being supported in the Dutch mission field for the time being at least. My personal feeling is that we should not take on the support of any others.

Hacker: What do you feel in so far as the training of national preachers? How should this be done and when do you feel they should be able to do a work on their own and under what conditions?

Richardson: I think that we definitely need an on the spot training program. We have had one Dutch Christian come to Abilene Christian College and spend four years over here. He has gone back and worked, and I think he has turned out reasonably well. There were some problems in the beginning when he was not supported, but my feeling is it has probably turned out for the best. If this could be done, which is doubtful, then I don't think it would be wrong. I think we ought to try to have a training program in the field itself or nearby.

Hacker: I know that we tried at Vievier and now the Germans are trying at Heidelberg. Do you think there is a possibility of a European training school or that each country will have to develop its own? I interrupted momentarily there. Would you go ahead with your answer.

Richardson: I don't know the answer to that. I am hoping that this program will work out successfully. If it will, it will be easier to maintain a training program for the area than in each individual country. For example, in Holland where we only have two American missionaries right now, it is impossible for them to do any work at all and have a training program.

Hacker: How do you feel that the religious, cultural and economic background of the people has influenced the work in Holland?

Richardson: Well, its culture is entirely different to your situation in Africa or India. The living standard is rising and I would say it is high at the present time. The educational situation is good. Our children, when we came back from Holland, were well advanced beyond the children their age here. Their education system is wonderful. It is an intellectual situation resulting, on the one hand, in a lot of indifference. There is atheism. There is also a strong tendency toward free thinking and I suppose liberalism would be our nearest word to it in the churches. I think this is one of the things. Then materialism is so strong. The Dutch people are confronted with a climate that can be pretty terrible over a long period of time. When they have some pretty weather, they drop everything, including the church, and this has been true of the ones that we have supposedly converted. During the summer time, if the weather is pretty, they just drop everything and go for the great outdoors. I think that perhaps the cultural background has had some influence in that direction.

Hacker: What serious challenges do you feel you had to overcome as you prepared to go to Holland and as you met these challenges when you arrived on the field?

Richardson: Well, language was one of the challenges. I had no previous background except that I had a book and I studied this as much as I could before I went. This and different customs. The customs in any country are different from ours and some times we go not realizing that this is the case and it takes awhile to adjust. Both myself and my wife adjusted, I think, rather easily. We wondered what this culture shock thing is all about because we were not aware of anything like this. Certainly, my wife, if she had one, never complained about it or showed indications of it. I think that it is possible to adjust if we realize that we are in a different country and the religious situation is different. We had to oppose Baptist here. We had to learn Calvinistic doctrine when we got there so you meet different issues. You have to throw away a lot of your old sermon outlines or all of them and adapt to the situation as it is there.

Hacker: As you approached your work on the field, what did you feel about methodology? What type methods did you use and how did you adjust these methods to your situation?

Richardson: Joe, I think that all of us who have been on the mission field at that period of time are aware of the fact that we probably, and I use the word probably because until we succeed I don't think we can say what was a mistake and what wasn't, but now I think our thinking is that we probably made mistakes in about two or three things. Our first mistake probably was in the benevolent program. Yet you would

have to see the poverty that was there when we went to understand why it seemed so necessary. It turned out to be a great liability. The second was in supporting Dutch preachers. I think this has created more heartaches and more problems than it has solved. The third one I am wondering now. I may be completely wrong in this but buying church buildings for them was probably a mistake. I may be completely wrong.

Hacker: How were the church buildings financed there? How do they continue to be maintained?

Richardson: They were financed mostly by American money and are maintained partly with Dutch funds but largely with contributions from the States.

Hacker: What do you think about the development of leadership among the members of the church? Do you think there is any progress being made in this area?

Richardson: I think there is some. There is potential leadership there. Now, I am wondering personally if we don't need to back off a little bit farther and concentrate on--I know I talked to Tom and some others and they're feeling the same way that we need to concentrate a little more on evangelizing, on reaching out and on training and sort of force the local and native men to assume more responsibility.

Hacker: You mentioned that you feel that you need to reach out and this brings up the question about our work this past summer. You preached in the campaign that Harding students held this past summer. How do you feel about the campaign method now that you have participated in it?

Richardson: Joe, I think it is wonderful. I really do. I said that awhile ago and I don't suppose it hurts to get that on tape because I made a report on the Dutch work just a few minutes ago. I feel that this is really wonderful and that from one point of view, the Dutch point of view, these people were really impressed both the members and it did them a world of good, the Dutch Christians. I think the campaign in The Hague was a tremendous blessing because those Dutch Christians needed something to unify them. They needed fellowship. I think this gave it to them and I think these young people added more to that than anything else. Also the ones who were visiting, the unsaved, were impressed. I think a gospel was preached by action during that campaign. That's wonderful. I heard so many fine comments from the Dutch people about it. I think it is great.

Hacker: As you were in a position to observe, not being involved in the administration of the campaign but simply having the responsibility of the preacher, what would you say we could do to improve this method in so far as our approach and day to day work or whatever you observed that might be of help?

Richardson: I hadn't thought about that very much but right off I think you would have an opportunity and the ones who want to do a little more work on their Dutch. This is something of course with the Dutch language, you can't do what you can do in German perhaps, but this would help and yet I don't think it was that much of a liability. I felt that the people there were impressed with the way it was. I didn't talk to Wil that much to know whether he felt your cooperation was good or not, but I think he did. I don't know of any suggestions.

Hacker: How do you feel about some of these special approaches? We have developed Bible correspondence courses and they are being used in Holland. We have developed this campaign approach. We have groups. We have a group, for example, of Harding alumni who will be going to live in Munich or the Munich area next summer. How do you feel about these special approaches as opposed to the way you began?

Richardson: Well, this is a phase that we've got to go through now to find out. I feel that this is the right way to do it. I am optimistic and hopeful. I believe that the correspondence course work is going to really open a lot of doors. I am hoping certainly that it is going to continue to prove to be as successful as it looks right now. I think that this approach is the best one for the present. I would like to say on campaigns, too, that in 1963 we had another type of campaign in The Hague where a group of us who could speak the language and where they had four missionaries working in this city at that time and this was successful. I think it would prove successful again as another method to be tried to say in Rotterdam or somewhere if we could get a group to go. I think if they can work together harmoniously and have this disposition, I think this is the greatest potential for our work. It would have worked in The Hague if the four men had stayed together and continued over a long period because this was building up the finest thing we had ever had in Holland.

Hacker: It could also be used as follow-up on the type campaigns with these college students, I would think.

Richardson: Yes.

Hacker: What do you think about the correspondence courses? In Holland, have they been written by men who are familiar with the Dutch people or are they translations of American correspondence courses?

Richardson: They are re-worked but more re-written. In other words, they are de-Americanized if that expresses what I am trying to say. They are Dutch courses with American influence or background.

Hacker: In language training, what advice would you give to a young person who is preparing to go to Holland? Would you advise them to try to learn Dutch in this country or go to a language school in Holland?

Richardson: I would advise them to do what they could if there is a possibility of learning the language here it certainly would be an asset. I don't think it is essential. In other words, they should not hesitate to go if they find that it is impossible to learn the Dutch before they go. I don't think it is that much of a barrier because I feel you need some time any way to adjust to customs and to culture and while you are learning the language is a very good time to be studying this other thing to and where a language like Dutch is so hard to get over here that I feel it is not that much of a problem.

Hacker: What advice would you give to a young person as you think back over your original decision and going through the gaining of support and getting over there? What were some of the problems you faced in gaining your support and maintaining your support that you, in retrospect, would give advice to a person that is planning to go?

Richardson: I think the first thing is a definite commitment. I think we have to believe that God will help us, and I think we have to make the commitment so strongly that we are going to go and that we feel that this is God's plan for us. I think this will be reflected in our approach as we approach congregations. I believe that support can be obtained. I would certainly advise finding a congregation large enough and willing enough to take care of all the support if possible, but I wouldn't say that it has to be that way.

Hacker: Did you raise your support in two areas, your personal living and working fund, or how did you go about raising your support?

Richardson: I had both the personal living support and the working fund.

Hacker: What rule of thumb did you use in determining how much you should raise for each fund?

Richardson: I think at this time we tried to compare the living standards in Holland and the living standards here and find a happy medium recognizing that it costs us more to live there than it does a Dutchman, for example. We settled somewhere in between.

Hacker: How did you arrive at a figure for your working fund?

Richardson: I didn't. We just used what we could get which was not enough.

Hacker: How did you find the administration of this once you got over there? Did you find it adequate or inadequate or somewhere in between and what are some of the things that you found that you were using this money for?

Richardson: We used it for advertising and in newspaper, for printing tracts, for distributing pamphlets sometimes on a wholesale scale throughout a city, from door to door, advertising short meetings. We did not have a correspondence course at that time which is unfortunate because I think it would have worked.

Hacker: What are some of the groups that you have seen come into Holland since the war and succeed in evangelistic efforts?

Richardson: Well, I think your group was successful in what you were there for.

Hacker: I mean outside the churches of Christ. Other religious groups.

Richardson: I'm not sure that any of them have. There are, I believe, 200 Mormon missionaries in Holland. I feel that their work has been very unsuccessful considering the men and the money that they have poured into it. Jehovah's Witnesses have been successful in their work. Now, whether they came directly from the States to Holland or out of Germany into Holland, I am not sure because we only contacted the Dutch. There were no Americans there. However, they got there, they have done an efficient work.

Hacker: I noticed in The Hague there is a large Holiness group. Do you know anything of the background of that group?

Richardson: No, I don't but the Holiness church or groups have been there a long time and have had a reasonable degree of success.

Hacker: Having had some contact with our work and being kind enough to come down and speak to our students today, do you have any suggestions that you would offer to us on how we can improve or what we may do to better motivate our young people and get them on the field?

Richardson: Joe, keep exposing these young people to the mission fields. I think this is the way we will build up an army for the Lord to go into the different countries. I stated in my report tonight that I think Holland, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, western Germany and these fields have been a forgotten mission field for the past ten years. I think that you are doing as much as anyone, more perhaps, to re-awaken an interest in this particular field. I feel that it is tragic if we forget any field where we have started a work and then draw back and forget it is there. I recommend that you go right ahead with these campaigns. I think that in five or six years we can see some real results of this. Lets encourage the young people to become familiar with all of the potential, the fields and the possibilities. Keep on doing and enlarging what you have started. I think this is one of the greatest things. I like what you are doing too. I don't think Evertt and I even discussed this particular phase of it. I like the idea of your bringing someone out of the field and having him here for a year. It looks to me like that has got to do a lot of good. I appreciate the emphasis that you are putting on this. We have to have 15 or 20 men in Holland if we are going to make a breakthrough and get the work done that needs to be done. I think this would apply to Norway, Denmark, Sweden or any of these other European countries or any where else. I would like to see us having more of these campaigns exposure efforts to expose young people to the mission fields. I would like to see us approach our work from this new angle that we have been talking about and I think a number are with the correspondence course, with more follow up work and with putting more responsibility on the native workers and sort of withdrawing from the local congregation to the extent that they have to carry a great portion of their own load.

Hacker: This was one thing that was very gratifying with our work in The Hague this last summer. I understand from Brother Goodheer that they provided all of the financial needs for that campaign out of the Dutch church. They are planning to do the same thing next summer if we go back.

Richardson: Joe, I visited the church in Olstenden while we were there in 1960 and it is a Dutch speaking congregation in Belgium, but this group of Christians were abandoned you might say because of necessity. They have been there on their own and they have three men there that have developed real leadership ability. They can preach and they cant teach. This was one thing that convinced me that sometimes we need to just get out of the way, that we are more in the way than we are helping. I think this is one of the strongest groups that I contacted while I was over there.

Hacker: Do you see then some growth taking place there that you feel will expand itself in evangelization?

Richardson: No, I think they need training in evangelism. I think this would be one weakness because they don't know where to go on that. They have grown spiritually and they are getting, I think Brother Boyd Williams gets there he will find a group of people that he can work with without taking over their work but add to and show them how to evangelize.

Hacker: I appreciate your coming down today and talking with our students and taking this time to share with us your experiences and your ideas and attitudes about how we can improve our work and apply our young people to preaching the gospel around the world. We want you to feel free to come down and visit with us regularly. Thanks again for giving us this time on the interview.

Richardson: Thank you, Joe. It's been a real pleasure.