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Interview of Robert and Susan Grissom

Robert Grissom

Susan Grissom

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LIVING HISTORY OF MISSIONS

Volume 3, No. 1

I'm Joe Hacker and this is Volume 3, No. 1 in the series, Living History of Missions. We are recording today from my office on the campus of Harding College. We shall be talking with Robert Grisson and his wife Susan.

Hacker: Robert, would you and Susan give a brief historical outline of the work in that country; and then, a discussion of your work in particular.

Robert: There was some work done in Brazil prior to the date, 1960, by Arlie Smith and Ivan Rude who soon returned home. Arlie has worked in establishing one or two congregations in Brazil already. By 1961, a group went from Abilene to work in the city of Sao Paulo, working together. We joined this group as volunteers after our graduation from Harding in 1965, and we went as the trainees go from Harding to help in any way possible—to keep our eyes and supposedly our mouths closed. After our two years of training in volunteer work in Sao Paulo, we decided we liked Brazil. We could do the work, and we could handle the language well and decided to return. We did a survey in the Picaba area, an industrial outside of Sao Paulo, because of the great interest in the correspondence course and the great population growth going on. We came back for a year's study and returned to Brazil as full time workers in September, 1968.

Hacker: In your experience in Brazil and from your knowledge of the work there, how would you assess the rate of growth of the church in Brazil as a result of your efforts?

Robert: Well, I can speak of the rate in Sao Paulo and several other cities, as well as our work. We have been there since 1968 and our goal in 1968 was to establish a church in 3 years. This was possible with the Lord's blessing. I think the work there goes moderately rapid. There are four churches in Sao Paulo and soon to be 5, just in the city of Sao Paulo. A number of smaller churches in the interior are growing rapidly—congregations of 70-80-people. There is a strong congregation in Curitiba to the south and Porto Alegre in the southern most state. There is also work being done, evidently well, in Belo Horizonte. Rio has proved to be a difficult city. Rio de Janeiro has had a great deal of work by a very capable group of men and has so far proved a slow work. There is a congregation in the outskirts of the city. On the average you can count on a church being established by men within 5 years of the date he set the goal for this, and sooner if he has a lot blessings, luck and good help.

Hacker: How do you account for the difference in the growth rate at Rio as compared to the others?

Robert: I really don't know. What do you think about that, Susan? Perhaps Rio is a resort city.

Susan: That, and also, the standards are different in Rio than they are in the rest of the country. It is a whole little world in itself and people are interested in different things. There is a lot more playing in Rio; whereas, Sao Paulo is very businesslike. Also, parts that are affluent are very affluent and the parts that are

poor are extremely poor. They hardly have any middle class, but we are not that well acquainted with the situation. I think it is a different place. Also, it is extremely expensive to live there. They had to spend a whole lot more for living on a level comparable to the level we live on.

Hacker: What is the major religious backgrounds of the people with whom you work? Are they sophisticated people as far as their religion is concerned, or are they fairly primitive?

Robert: I would hesitate to say because there are so many different types of Catholics. Of course, Brazil is 90% Catholic but it is rapidly becoming a non-Catholic country. It will take a long time to remove the social effect of Catholicism because the religious background of Brazil gives a clue to its state today. When Negro slaves were brought in the Colonial period, they were sprinkled Catholic on the dock. This was a national policy that no non-Catholic could enter the country. They entered thinking they were Catholic bringing their Afro-religions with them. It is interesting even today there are more people who go to the spiritists meetings, spiritists on three levels-black magic which works evil, one that merely consults the spirits to know what to do, and the white table spiritism which is known in the states, largely due to French rationalism and Alan Cardac, the moving historical figure in this belief. There are more people who attend these spirit sessions than attend mass. One out of 10 will go to mass. And in those who attend faithfully, not many of those are very sophisticated in their knowledge of the Catholic teaching. Someone has joked there, "They don't know the different Marys." There are four or five Marys they have statues of, and many of them are not aware really historically referring as one person. Christ is thought of as a baby or a dying man but not the King of your life. Do you agree with that, Susan?

Susan: Yes, but some are sophisticated in their Catholicism. Our next door neighbor is from one of the old Polistro families and very traditional. She grew up with wealth; her parents had four maids to help with the house work. She is an educated Catholic. You can't tell her that in the Bible communion is supposed to be taken as both the bread and the wine. She knows that; her explanation is they only give the bread so not to make the people drunk with the wine.. She knows all the sophisticated excuses that the Catholics have dreamed up. She is actually much harder to teach than the Catholics who do not know much about his religion. Although he thinks it is right, when you confront him with what is wrong with it, he may not have ever thought of it; at least, he doesn't know the excuse behind it.

Hacker: From what cultural and economic background do most of your converts come from?

Robert: Lower middle class or upper lower class. Let's say in the country where it is not common for a person to have a car, most of them have no car. Only two families out of 8 have cars. Most of them do have TV, and some of them would have a washing machine and other small household appliances. That gives you a general idea about the working class. Very few rich people want to live in that area. It is simply an industrial center. There are some people well-educated and well-to-do there. The congregation has a per capita income of the working men of \$100 per month. The minimum wage is \$44 per month. There are people who earn as much as \$1,000 or \$2,000 per month in business or education but not in the church yet.

Hacker: Do you think, then, the methods and the appeal that we have is more to the cultural and economically deprived? How do you account for this?

Robert: I think the people there are there because they want jobs, and they moved there and made big changes in their lives and are more likely to listen to a new idea like Christianity. And Christianity is a new idea as compared to Catholicism. I think this accounts for our economic background. Of course, in Sao Paulo you find many people who are professionals and relatively wealthy by Brazilian standards in the church. And there are a few congregations which are made of very poor people. We have not striven to hit any one group. But Susan and I mainly worked with the lower middle class.

Hacker: So as far as the reception of the gospel in Brazil, do you feel that it cuts across cultural and economic levels and it is not exclusively dominated by any one group in the country?

Robert: Yes, generally, but I think the most receptive area is the lower middle class area, though.

Hacker: How does this affect your methods? Do you find them equally responsive to any particular methods as far as their cultural and economic background is concerned?

Robert: No, one thing we strive to do which has proved fruitful is using relatives. When you reach one person, the most likely person you can reach from there is not someone you have been teaching 6 months, but one of his relatives whom he has spoken to for a half an hour. Even if he is rich, he still has relatives. If he is poor, he has relatives. And we have discovered that when you get into a family you gain a great deal of respect simply from being a friend of "John's", and you may be able to reach all of John's cousins. At least have an opportunity to speak with them; whereas, under certain circumstances they would not give you the time of day to hear you talk about religion.

Hacker: What are some of the more serious challenges you had to face and overcome in your work?

Robert: I think, perhaps, Brother Hacker, the greatest challenges that anyone has to face are within himself. I think the missionary's greatest challenges are his own personal shortcomings, for instance, his own initiative. And these are the greatest challenges we have had to face. And some reading I have done on the Peace Corps and similar organizations say they face the same problems. As far as the country or other religions are concerned there are some challenges. I think the greatest is to be able to communicate with the people the gospel without them conceiving you as being a denomination. There is a great deal of "crintzy" (Believer) which is general terminology for protestant. Culture is already established in Brazil and if you don't do this and don't that you must be a "crintzy"; you must be a believer or protestant. And they have an impressive list of don'ts. They have perhaps done the Old Testament all over again on their steam and decided just what a person can and can't do. They have turned a lot of people off as far as religion is concerned. It is a real challenge to reach these people. We spoke to a lawyer just before we left, and he expressed his frustration that the Catholics were doing their thing, but not obeying the Lord. The protestant each had its own idea and church, and the spiritist were off into mumbo-jumbo in superstition. He said, "Someone ought to be following must that straight and narrow which God intended us to follow." We explained to him further that we were striving

to do, he said that he had been looking for this since he was a young man and had never found it and never had any support in this goal. And many Brazilians are impressed with the idea with going back and being a primitive Catholic where the church started originally before it was dominated by hierarchy or tradition, simply following apostolic teaching of Christ. Our challenge as far as personal things go (one of the worse things we met) is jealousy in the church. We worked with house churches because of economic necessity, meeting in two different homes-our home and a home of a Brazilian; and one family was quite jealous that it wasn't in their home. They didn't want to live a Christian life; they wanted the short cut to fame like several other people in the Bible. These people tried to find a short cut to fame and robbed the Lord while doing it. I think this was one our biggest challenges. Susan feels that gossip was one of the larger problems. I suppose working more with the women she would encounter it.

Susan: Yes, and too, the gossip was connected with this situation of jealousy. The church nearly fell apart once because of it. We spent 2 or 3 months peacemaking before we mended it all back together.

Hacker: What about this in relationship to fellow workers? Do you have this kind of problem in Brazil?

Robert: Fortunately, no.

Hacker: Are you being really honest?

Robert: Yes, I'm being very honest, Brother Hacker, when we went to Sao Paulo the thing that impressed us most of all was about the group with which we worked and trained was their loyalty to one another in their avoidance of jealousy and rumor mongering in their simple Christian love for other Christians, whether Brazilian or American. We were deeply impressed with how well they got along and this is a necessary ingredient for a large group working together. It is a great desire to avoid anything that would cause jealousy or gossip.

Susan: When we got up there, the women held a orientation meeting for the girls. One of the things said during the orientation was that they have always tried not to ever say anything about a person that could be at all uncomplimentary. They have consciously avoided that from the beginning of the group. They have never had any dissension among the women that I know of. Of course, them telling us that was to encourage us to do the same thing so we were very careful to. I think this avoidance to even casual criticism or wondering about someone else has really played a part in the unity of that group. And it taught us a good lesson.

Hacker: I think this is wonderful because we do have this problem in other areas of the world among our workers. This is one of the big areas of work that the devil is doing in our midst. What are some of the methods that you are now using successfully?

Robert: We are teaching the Word. How? The most successful way is to find someone who is interested and convert him and then go on to his friends and relatives and neighbors. We use the Bible correspondence course, "What the Bible Says" which was written by the group in Sao Paulo-an 11 lesson course that introduces a person to the Bible. This helps to avoid the necessity of having to explain to someone, "This is a Bible; it is divided into 2 parts, the Old Testament and the New Testament." You can't assume that they know these things, and the Bible correspondence gives an orientation. It serves as a funnel to draw in interested people, and also as a filter to filter out

people who aren't interested at all in the Bible or religion. It saves you time, we discovered, to encourage people to do at least one or two lessons before you promise them a personal class, showing the slides. We have a set of colored slides which was developed by Glen Owen and Ellis Long and several other of the men in the group in Sao Paulo. They all worked together on this and came up with an excellent slide series. We use this only after a person has demonstrated a great deal of interest—either he has completed several lessons of the Bible correspondence or has shown interest in another way. We have wasted a great deal of time in homes that really weren't interested in the Bible. We spent 5 weeks showing them once a week and staying an hour or two and when we got through they said very nice, but weren't interested in Christ. One method we used as far as the worship of the church was concerned was house churches by economic necessity not by conviction that that is the only way to do it. But we didn't want to use outside money, and we hadn't raised any. It was easier not to and perhaps better not to. We were surprised a bit if you didn't explain before hand but on the whole the reaction was very good to the atmosphere which you had in a home worship. Even though the Brazilians have a thing against going into a home too soon or to a person you don't know, they were pleased that the church caused homes to open up, and they behaved themselves as they were expected to in these homes that were hosts to the weekly worship services. This saved the church the necessity of paying rent and enabled the church to save money for building on a lot later. (which has just been purchased) We have been in Cambara three years and they are going on their own. We have terminated our part of the work, leaving the church there with a Brazilian preacher whom they have chosen and they are carrying the larger part of their financially load. They have borrowed some but their leadership is local. This is largely due to the small situation you have in a house church, you don't have to have a perfect preacher or perfect song leader and people still participate in the worship and really feel close together and to the Lord. And one of the remarks of the members was that we have to have honesty in the church. We have to be honest and the house church encourages this. I think Susan's ladies class has been a great asset to the church. Training new converts and training the members is the greatest need after you have begun work. Even more time needs to be spent on this, I feel, than on your evangelism. If your members are doing the evangelistic work then the key function of the missionary can more and more turn to edifying the members.

Susan: One of the things we did at the beginning was a Vacation Bible School which brought in a lot of good contacts and was a very good initial opener. We had lived in our house about a month before I finally got up enough courage to meet our neighbor because there are tall steps for both my house and hers and wall in between so I had to go down and around and back up and besides I was shy. When I worked up courage to go to talk to and invite him to Vacation Bible School, she sent him gladly which surprised me. When it was over I went back to thank them for sending them. Her husband opened the door and said they were angry at my husband. I thought, oh, no! but I said oh, really, why? He said because you had this tremendously good school for our son and he has come home and told us all the good things he has learned and you've stopped. Later, his mother was converted and we think he will be soon and some day his father will be although he is holding out right now. This brought us a number of contacts that we wouldn't have had any other way. We got a lot of favorable impressions.

Robert: You do have to begin some where, and this was our beginning—one of our beginning outreaches. Also, we conducted a community survey going from door to door asking religious questions, using this as an excuse to talk to people and offer them the Bible correspondence course and the slides. It was a mistake to offer the slides really, but indirectly through the survey, we reached the first family. We reached relatives of some of them we surveyed and taught, the relatives were converted first and then the

family we met in the survey would be converted. It has just grown from there-neighbors, fellow workers, etc. The church is still reaching out into the vast expanses of this extended family.

Susan: The VBS had a part in the conversion because these children who went changed very much in their behavior at home. The mothers were very much impressed which had a part in their later conversion.

Robert: We didn't know it at the time, but one of the little boys wanted to become a Christian from the date of the Bible school, and he gave his mother no peace until the day that he was baptized. The same day five others followed him to be baptized.

Hacker: What methods have you either tried or observed to be unusable in Brazil?

Robert: I really don't know. I'm sure there have been some things that we have tried and didn't work. One thing, I think you need to avoid is to show slides to everyone who will accept them because many people politely accept you to come into their home and show them slides of the Bible and you don't find the people who are really interested if you are wasting your time on lot of people who are not. So we began imitating Walter Cridell's work in Curitiba. Walter takes the Bible correspondence course and follows up on it closely, even puts in personal notes. Before there was such a demand for the course all the men in Sao Paulo were doing this. It seems to be more effective with us to do a great deal with a few students than have a great number of students and do a little with each one. Perhaps, Susan can think of some things that weren't usable. I think the greatest thing that helped us avoid these things that were wrong was the Mission Seminar in 1965. The course in Anthropology helped us avoid some mistakes. Of course, the period of work with the group in Sao Paulo opened our eyes to a great number of things that were useful and so we already had a repertoire of useful tools that the group in Sao Paulo had developed. We had just to get out and work and use them.

Hacker: What special approaches have you used? I know the Sao Paulo group is a group approach. You began with them and went off by yourself. What is your evaluation of the various kinds of approaches which can be used by a beginning person?

Robert: Not because they were from ACC and we were from Harding did we decided to go off, but the group there is older and they already had established ways. All of them were working in congregations. I felt that I could personally do more if I had to get out hunt. If it was sink or swim, we would swim, but if it was just come in and help us, I'm afraid I wouldn't have worked as well as I needed to. So we decided to work near them and we have a lot of support and friendship from the group at Sao Paulo and enjoy being around them very much. We have benefited from their work as you already know, using the correspondence course and the slides and numerous other tools. They have a training program at Sao Paulo which is helping us a great deal, too. One of the preachers of the training course has come out several times to preach for the church there and they have invited this person to preach.

Susan: I think one, I don't know if it is a special approach, but from the beginning as soon as we baptized the first people we started telling them that we were going to leave by a certain date and that they were going to have to grow up and be ready. They didn't like it, but they were always aware of it. When my neighbor was baptized not too long after that she said, "I want to be able to teach like you teach." When she was talking to someone else she said, "They are going to be leaving soon and we have to be ready to teach; we have to be ready to take their places. Who is going to do this

if we don't?" They fussed about it up until the time we left. They would say, "You aren't really going to leave us, are you?" And then we reminded them that our parents wanted to see us and they are so close in their families that they understood that. I think that must have been the only thing we used that you could be called a special approach.

Robert: We did have, as Susan touched on, a three year goal. Our optimum goal was to work two years to leave the church to function on its own and carrying on its own business but our maximum tolerance limit was three years and we had to go to the 3 year limit. The church there now, we believe, is capable to carry on by itself. We just heard from them, and they baptized a man this month since we have been gone so they are apparently carrying on pretty well. The house church, the idea of working and worshipping in small groups until you have a financial base for buying, has been perhaps a different approach.

Hacker: How do you go about training your converts, and what do you think about training schools for converts?

Robert: Well, this is an approach. Our approach to training--the first thing we do after a person comes up out of the water is we tell him the Lord has a use for him. We say, He is going to give you things you can do for Him--talents, and you ought to find out what you can do for Christ, and you ought to train yourself in study. Whatever it is, you ought to use it for the glory of God. And these people assume from day one that they have to talk about Christ and they all do and they are all seeking their talents. The basic talent they all have and every Christian should have is to tell why Christ died, and why I am a Christian. And this has been our first step in training. Our Bible school has been a normal Sunday school and very soon we were able to turn the adult class over to one of the members there. We had trained largely by apprenticeship and association. We showed them how we taught and they were allowed to teach.

Hacker: Do you have any formal training schools in Brazil.

Robert: We give them pointers in class, but it was largely informal. There is a school in Sao Paulo.

Hacker: Is that successful or not?

Robert: I think it is very successful. The school they have in Sao Paulo is one of the best training schools I have ever heard of, I think. They are doing a very good job. Fifteen preachers and church leaders in various ages.

Hacker: These people who are trained--Do they have a place to preach, or are they expected to go out and establish a congregation, and how do they support themselves?

Robert: They sign an agreement, as I understand it, from the very beginning stating no obligation to give them a job. In other words, they leave their secular work and study for 2 or 3 years and have not any assurance of a located work and several of them have already gone back to work in their regular jobs. and after two years it is possible to get back into your job and the swing. A number of them have found places to work. And have invitations from churches in other areas and this is a problem to the men in Sao Paulo, they train these fellows and they do such a good job, they have a great demand on them. And we, in fact, in Cambara have benefited from the training school. One of the men wants to go out to work in Cambara.

Hacker: Susan, what kind of recommendation would you make to young ladies who are planning to go to the mission field? How should they prepare?

Susan: 1. They should make a definite point to study their Bible and be close to God through prayer. This support you have to have, you can't do it without that. 2. They should have Christian training as to the kind of home they are going to have and they should have done Christian work here-teaching children, been in some kind of an active program here so they will have some idea of how to go about something.

Robert: It is just like what we were speaking about earlier, Brother Hacker. They should show some interest in being a missionary now.

Hacker: How do you suggest is the best way to get the language training necessary?

Robert: We had a great fortune going into a training situation which was already set up for us. Glen Owen, who was very proficient in the language and a very strong student of the languages, set us up a program of a combination of grammar study and formal study in a classroom situation and outside a conversation. Even our classroom study was divisified. We were able to converse fairly well after 4 months. Susan and I were married in Brazil and we went on a honeymoon together to a city in the interior of Brazil and got along on our own fairly well. Of course, we weren't able to talk on the telephone until about nine months. Susan might give you more information about that.

Susan: I didn't really finish with the other, I think a girl going to the mission field should read about mission work and things other missionary women have written so she will have an idea of what is facing her. If all possible she should attend the Mission Seminar. I think it really helped us. And the book, Learning the Foreign Language, really helped us. It had some pointers you can use from the minute you get there. In fact, you should read it before you get there and keep it open several months while you are learning. That is when it is most valuable.

Hacker: I think some of our Brethren think they can learn a language over night. I think some of our Brethren think you can go to a place and they think you are stupid if you are not preaching in six months. It may take you six months to buy beans on your own.

Susan: You are probably stupid if you do preach in six months because you have no idea what you saying, or who is understanding it, or what they are understanding.

Hacker: I am glad to hear you say that because there are some who are very impatient who are providing support. They think that this should be done so quickly; this has created a great deal of problems. Let's relate to the problems that you may have had in gaining and keeping your support? Have you had any particular problems in that area that you have benefited from the experience?

Robert: We found the greatest difficulty back when Susan was single. It is difficult for a single girl to raise support to go to the mission field even as a volunteer and even if it is only \$150 a month. Four individuals supported Susan with \$5 a week, and a church contributed \$25 a month and this was her entire support. The greatest problem from there was communication. On our part, two congregations, and on their part, keeping us up on developments and news from the congregation so we would know what is going on there, and when we arrive home, they don't have to say, "Who is he?" This probably is the greatest problem any missionary faces-communication. We've been fortunate in having good supporters from the beginning-McKnight in St. Louis supported me in 1965. They are still helping in our support in a building program, but they are not able to send much. They are still helping, and hopefully some day they will

help more.

Hacker: How do you see the future of your work?

Robert: Well, our lifetime goal is directly and indirectly from our work and the work of congregations we start and Christians we win, is to see 40 churches in Brazil in our lifetime. That is our big lifetime goal. Our immediate plans are to return to a city adjacent to Cambara and Sao Paulo; a city of 300,000 and establish a congregation there in this goal period of 3 years also. The city of Jacrezenko is also industrial. It is a beautiful town compared to Cambara, and we are going to enjoy living there, I believe. Our hopes is to do just as we have done in Cambara-be there 3 years and win and train people to go on their own, and then expect them to evangelize others. The church in Cambara has demonstrated this in a marvelous way. One of the members said, "Some day we want to send a missionary out like Thyatira, our supporting congregation who sent out Robert and Susan." They look at the church that are supporting us and how they have been involved in the work for some time and they take them as models and they say we want to do this some day. We hope to have the same success in Jacrezenko as we have had in Cambara to prove to be fruitful field. The Lord has really blessed us, and since we have already made this beginning, we want to go back to work some more.

Susan: The people in Cambara too have already volunteered to help us start this next church which will be good for both them and us. We won't be so alone which is very difficult and it will be additional training for them and we will be still close to help when they have problems and they won't feel like orphans. We deliberately chose Jacrezenko because it close enough to them that we can still be available to them when we are needed.

Hacker: It would be interesting in 3 years, if the Lord's will, to get together again and talk and maybe listen to what has been said today after we hear what you have to say 3 years from now.

Robert: We really feel the Lord has blessed us in the work we have done in Cambara. The brethren who supported down there are happy and brethren who are down there now who weren't there before, all of Catholic background and all firm Christians, are really enthused that we went, too.

Hacker: Well, this is wonderful, and it is very encouraging to hear you give this report. I know that our students will benefit from it. We want to wish you Godspeed as you have this period of break. I know it isn't a period of rest, but it is a period of break between the work you have been doing and the work that you will be doing. We would be happy to help you in any way that we can to encourage you in your work. Thank you very much for taking the time to share these experiences with us and with our students.