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Interview of Carl Robinson

Carl Robinson

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This is Winfred Wright, January 31, 1972. I am interviewing Carl Robinson who will be leaving soon to work in Ivory Coast, Africa.

Wright: We are happy to have you visiting on our campus today, Carl. We are happy to have you share some of your insights in the work in French Africa. We would like to ask you a few questions concerning your plans and the work that you have already done in French Africa. First, would you give us a brief outline of how you have come to decide to go to Ivory Coast and something of the work you have already done there.

Robinson: We first begin to work for African Christian Schools to solicit funds in behalf of the schools in West Africa, which at that time was called Nigerian Christian Schools. This was in 1966. Then in 1968, some of us went to visit the area. During this time, Willie Cato, who was working with us, suggested to me that somebody needed to go to Ivory Coast. It was an area that was French-speaking where none had gone. We feel like this was the beginning of our decision to go to Ivory Coast. We didn't make this decision at this time, but it was the planting of the idea. In 1970 Maurice Hall and I visited Ivory Coast and some other French-speaking countries to investigate the possibility of going and tried to determine some of the interest that we felt would be there. We were impressed with the beauty of the city, Abidjan and of the reception that the people appeared to have toward the Bible.

Wright: Would you summarize briefly the work that has been done in French-speaking Africa to this point. I know that it is not very much.

Robinson: There are nineteen French-speaking countries with 96 million people where we almost haven't been. There has been one French-speaking group sent from America to French Africa. Actually, they are out in the Indian Ocean, but on the continent of Africa, we have not sent any French-speaking missionaries into that area except for very short periods of time. There are congregations of the Lord's church established in five of the nineteen French-speaking African countries. One involves these people who are out in the Indian Ocean, and they are doing a very fine work. There are also English-speaking missionaries in a section of Camerouns, which used to be ruled by England through Nigeria until this country got its independence when they elected to go with the Camerouns, that also got their independence at about the same time. Eventually since French is now being taught in school, they also will be French-speaking, but because of having been ruled by England, they are English-speaking. In addition to this, Africans have established congregations in French-speaking Guinea, Dahome and Togo. A man that was in the Bible Training School in Freetown, Sierra Leone thought he had to quit school and get a job. In the process of this, he went to French-speaking Guinea. While he was looking for a job he began to study with people and four congregations have been established. One of them has over 200 members. Some of those that he converted began to preach. One such fellow said his home was Dahome, and he wanted the gospel to go to his people. He couldn't get

this man to go with him, but he did get some of the missionaries from Freetown, Sierra Leone to follow him over there. They stayed a short period of time and helped him get started about a year and a half ago, August of 1970. Someone of that group has gone into Togo and established congregations. As a result, we have the Lord's church in five of these French-speaking African countries.

Wright: Would you tell us something of the religious background of the people that you will be working with?

Robinson: People in Ivory Coast are largely animism, that is, they worship spirits, idols, juju worship and that kind of thing. About 2/3 of them would be in this category. About 1/4 are Moslems, Islamic people. Then close to 1/8 or a little more would be labeled Christians. They have a Methodist or Catholic background and things of that nature.

Wright: What about their cultural and economic background, how does it differ from ours?

Robinson: Of course, this area is very close to the equator and it is along the coastal region where we plan to go. Much of it is jungle area except in the cities themselves. We find there is a great deal of agriculture being developed. One of the things, as we were leaving, they gave us a sack of coffee, whole grains of coffee, a pound of it. They wanted to advertise their coffee, a very fine coffee. They have also other types of agriculture such as all the tropical fruits and this kind of thing. Of course, the name Ivory Coast came from the time when they used to ship so much ivory from this area, but there is not nearly so much of that left now days; however, they do have some mines of such things as diamonds and things of this nature.

Wright: I have heard you mentioned something about the modern aspect of the city of Abidjan. Would you tell us something about the cost of living there and the general economic conditions of the people in this big city?

Robinson: It is a city about the size of Memphis with about as many twenty-story buildings. We understand that it has been judged the cost of living is 24% more than it would be in New York City so we expect it to be quite high. We also know that we can expect our apartment to cost us at least \$200, a modest apartment.

Wright: I'm sure, as every missionary, you will have certain hurdles to overcome or challenges you will have to meet and overcome to be effective. As you look forward to your work, what do you anticipate to be your greatest challenges?

Robinson: One of the very important things will be the matter of speaking French. It is almost necessary completely to be able to speak French to carry on a work in Ivory Coast. People who do not speak French will find very limited communications. There are a few people that speak also English, but they are so few and those people are largely very busy at other things and probably will not be very much interested in religious matters; of course, if they are, this would be fine. This is the number one problem that I view. That people who might go should learn French. There are also problems associated with working in a city area, urban life. We anticipate the fact that we will have to do a lot of personal work, but this isn't really a problem as I see it because I think this is the kind of work that needs to be done here as well as there, so it won't be so very much different in that respect.

Wright: What approach do you plan to take in this new work? What methods will you be using?

Robinson: We plan to advertise in the newspaper a Bible correspondence course. As these people pick this course then we would be contacting them personally and doing personal work. As we get acquainted with these people we anticipate that some of them would have moved in from the rural areas and we do anticipate following them to their homes in some bush country area and carrying the gospel there, too. When you do that, no doubt, there will be preaching to larger groups. But as you start it will begin with a great deal of personal work. We also hope of getting a radio broadcast. We have tried to get such while we are still here in the states but have been unable to get it. We are not exactly sure why. They simply said we couldn't have it. They gave no reason; however, we also feel like we shouldn't take the first no for an answer. We are going to go back and try again, maybe repeatedly. We have some idea to possibilities to why they act as such. It is possible that the government doesn't really want religious broadcasts on the radio. This may be what is happening in some countries, but in addition to this, there is a ministerial alliance in the country that is dominated particularly by the Methodist bishop, and anyone who doesn't belong to the ministerial alliance may find some difficulty. We did look through the newspapers which we brought back from this area and didn't find a single religious broadcast listed, so it may not be that the Methodists is causing the trouble, but such has been the problem in some of the English areas where they have a ministerial alliance.

Wright: The next question may be somewhat negative, but are there any methods that have been used in other countries in Africa or elsewhere that you definitely do not intend to use?

Robinson: This is a little difficult to think about, but the thing that occurs to me has to do with American support for native workers in the land. This quite often proves to be a thing which cannot be turned loose after it is once begun. And we think, however, as you are there and see the difficulty with the people it may be more difficult to turn it down than as we view it from this stage of the work. We also realize that if it is to ever become a self-supporting work on its own, it needs to be work that they themselves do and without dependence on America because if they depend on us then they are doing less for themselves, and they won't grow as much probably.

Wright: So basically, you are opposed to using American support for national preacher.

Robinson: Yes, I feel this way, that we do need to try to avoid at least long term support. Once you get it started on the short term how are you going to keep it from going on unless it is for a specific item that you doing at a particular time and go a particular place within a limited time. There might be some instance in which you might want to do this.

Wright: Do you have any specific plans for beginning a training school or how do you plan to train the converts to carry on their work?

Robinson: We think this is very important toward establishing a permanent work, that you train them. None of us will live always, sooner or later we are going to die, and even if we were to remain there for the rest of our life someone has to take over after you are gone. Therefore, we feel that it is very important to train them to take our place later. But it is important from another point of view as well. They can go to their own people better than we can because they know their customs, problems, etc. They understand their people and their peculiar customs which we might not learn for years. Mistakes that we would make, they would never make because they have grown with it, and after these things have been pointed out to us, we have to remember them where they do not because they have already learned these things, become a part of them and simply grown with it.

Wright: You mentioned a little while ago the challenge of language in going to Ivory Coast. Would you tell us a little bit about your preparation for speaking the French language and how effective you think you will be upon arrival in the use of the French language?

Robinson: We had French in high school and that, of course, has been so long ago that it has been very little use to us. This past summer we did have a year of French at David Lipscomb. We are studying some alone, my wife and I, who has had two years of Latin and five years of French, together as we have opportunity, as we travel and at home in between trips. We also plan to go to France and study French eight hours a day for a month just before we go to Ivory Coast. We believe this will certainly not bring us up to perfection for whoever writes as such but it will give polishing to what we have.

Wright: Do you feel like you will be able to preach publicly on arrival?

Robinson: I hope to.

Wright: One of the big problems we are having today is gaining support for missions. Have you encountered any problems, and if so what is your greatest problem in gaining and maintaining support?

Robinson: I do not anticipate a great problem in gaining support. My salary is already guaranteed by the congregation that will be sponsoring us, Crieve Hall in Nashville, Tennessee. I also have my travel fund already furnished by a congregation that I formerly worked with. They have already sent in our fund to go over and told us they would do likewise when we come back. There are a number of funds which will be necessary to be raised, especially for a new work. This might be a little bit more of a problem than other types of work that have already been begun. For instance, often times the working fund is already available for a man who is going into a established work or other types of things. Some do not need a house in which to live, one may be available already. An automobile may be left back by the man before him so he may not need to raise funds for that. Furniture may already be available. When you start a completely new work, all of these things have to be kept in mind. Of course, for several years now, I have been raising funds, and though I don't think I am particularly an expert in this respect, I certainly think this may be part of the reason why I do not anticipate a problem in this regard. I see the main problem right now is finding others who will go and have a part in this work with us.

Wright: As you know, we are quite interested here at Harding in helping to improve the training of missionaries as well as improving our motivation of missionaries. How can we improve our contribution to mission work in West Africa and throughout the world?

Robinson: I have been aware for some time of Harding's emphasis upon missions and I appreciate it a great deal. I think one of the things that people need to be acquainted with is that they will be going into a surrounding that is different than what they have known in times past. There are differences as to the material things with which they will live. There are also cultural differences and these people need to be made aware of that. A missionary once observed his family having some difficulty because the wife wasn't aware of the type culture that she would be in. She had been a city girl and here they were in a very primitive surrounding, and she found it quite difficult to adjust at first. They must have made that adjustment because they have gone back for a second tour. They not only stayed out the full length of time but now are on the field for the second time. I observed them earlier in the first tour.

Wright: For the last question I'll ask you today, we look toward the future. We simply ask you to make a statement about how you feel about the future of your work in Ivory Coast.

Robinson: We have every reason to believe that we can expect the work in Ivory Coast to develop much as it has in neighboring countries. Work is already established in Nigeria which is in the same general area, and Guinea has a fine developing work. In Liberia just to the west, a work that has begun appears to be developing very well. It is not near as far along as the work in Guinea, but it appears to be developing well. Work in Sierra Leone which is just a little farther to the west is developing in a fine fashion. The people that we observed in Ivory Coast gave us every reason or it appeared so that they would respond just as much as their neighbors. There are a couple of stories which are very interesting to indicate the interest which we feel is there. In 1913, a long time ago, a man by the name of Harris came from Liberia. He had been under Methodist influence; he had a very simply message, he said, "Put away your fetishes and your idols, the God I'm going to tell you about is bigger. He made the heaven and earth and all things therein." In two short years he had over 100,000 followers. By this time France was at war in Europe. Germany had colonies in Africa, and they were afraid of the political explosiveness of this situation and reported it. Before he left, he told his people to build prayer houses, keep your meetings and look for the man who will come with the Book. This will not be worth as much to us in 1972 as it would have been 48 years or 20 years ago, but the fact that this story was told to us more than once in a short period, Harris' churches still exist, and the denominational people were using and taking advantage of this particular story to this day is an indication that is helpful to us. Also, Mr. Lawrence Anyema which lives in Abidjan, the capital, sent in a Bible correspondence course on which he write, "Most people here speak French; English is very limited." The word "very" was underlined. Indeed, his vocabulary may be limited because some of the phrases are repeated. He further said, "Paul heeded the Macedonian call, would you send us a call?" And then down at the bottom he added, "Our literature is very limited. We need spiritual guidance: we need the Lord's church; we need the prayers of Christians." Limited as his vocabulary may be, he had a strong appeal.

Wright: Carl, we appreciate very much your dedication to the spreading of the gospel, and we appreciate your coming by Harding today and visiting with our students and speaking to them. We appreciate you taking the time to talk with us in this particular interview. This has been Winfred Wright interviewing Carl Robinson, missionary for the Crieve Hall congregation in Nashville, Tennessee, who will be leaving the United States about July 1 and will be arriving in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, Africa, about August 1 of this year, 1972.