
Living History of Missions

Oral Histories

2-11-1970

Interview of Gwynneth Curtis

Gwynneth Curtis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/missions-history>

Recommended Citation

Curtis, G. (1970). Interview of Gwynneth Curtis. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/missions-history/23>

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral Histories at Scholar Works at Harding. It has been accepted for inclusion in Living History of Missions by an authorized administrator of Scholar Works at Harding. For more information, please contact scholarworks@harding.edu.



HARDING COLLEGE LIVING HISTORY OF MISSIONS

Volume I, No. 2

Gwynneth Curtis who is serving on the evangelistic field of Austria was interviewed by Joe Hacker and Keith Robinson on February 11, 1970.

Hacker: Brother Curtis, could you give us a brief historical outline of the work where you are laboring from the beginning to this date?

Curtis: Bob Hare moved from Germany to Vienna in 1957 to begin the work in Vienna. At that time there had been no work started there. He worked for a couple of years by himself until Brother Rob Pitts came. Then in 1961 a group of seven ex-students of Abilene Christian College moved into Vienna to help in the work there. During the last few years some of these workers have left for various and sundry reasons. Some of them have returned to the United States, and some of them have moved on to other cities within Austria. At the present time, there are two full time workers involved in the work in Vienna itself. There are congregations in Graz, Salzburg and Klagenfurt, as well as other small groups that are beginning to start up in smaller villages throughout the country.

Robinson: I think it might be worthwhile if you would give us the names of some of these in the group that went.

Curtis: Rex Earnhart, Lynn Camp, Frank McCutchen, Gwen Hensley, Roy Long, Bob Stewart and Tom Turner were in this group. They all went within a period of about six months of each other. They worked together in Vienna for around two years, and then one or two of them began moving to other cities and trying works. The brethren started a work in Lenz, Austria. Brother Rob Pitts and Brother Long went there, but after two years they decided it had not been successful enough to merit staying so this work was dropped.

Hacker: Could you give us the names of some of the men who are now working on the field in Austria?

Curtis: Brother Richard Walker is working in Klagenfurt now, but he plans to move to Vienna in March. Tom Turner is returning to work in Klagenfurt, taking up where Brother Walker is leaving off. Brother Rudolf Richer is now in Salzburg. Rudi is German and is doing a very fine work there. Rex Earnhart and Frank McCutchen are working in Graz. Gwen Hensley and I are working in Vienna. This last year we had two young men come to live in Vienna and work in Czechoslovakia. They were Tom Watson and Ed Reed. Brother Richard Williams moved originally to Salzburg to work also in Czechoslovakia, but he is making plans now to move to Vienna.

Hacker: You mentioned Czechoslovakia. Could you briefly sketch the relationship between the work you are doing in Vienna and the work we commonly call the Iron Curtain work?

Curtis: Because of the proximity of Vienna--the geographical location--we find ourselves nestled in among the eastern European countries of Czechoslovakia, Hungary,

Yugoslavia, Rumania and Bulgaria. We are within very short driving distance of all of these countries. Because Austria is neutral and we are able to travel fairly easily between these countries, we have used every opportunity that we have had to try to get into these places and sow the seeds of the gospel wherever possible.

Robinson: Keeping in mind the duplicity of your work, that is, with the Iron Curtain countries and Austria, give us some background first of all about the kind of people you are working with in Vienna, Austria, and what you have found in the Iron Curtain countries.

Curtis: I think as far as the religious background you can pretty well sum that up with one word and that is Catholicism because Catholicism is very strongly entrenched in these countries. This doesn't mean that all of the people are active Catholics, but most of them are tied to the church through their family. Nearly all of the babies, of course, are baptized into the Catholic Church. This causes the people to be pretty well bound to the church. We find this not only to be true in Austria where 92% of the people are registered Catholics, but we find it to spill over into these other countries because the Catholic Church has had an influence in these places for centuries. The Catholic influence is not as strong in some of these other countries simply because they have been living under Communism for quite awhile and naturally all religion has been to a certain degree suppressed.

The other denominational groups have been making fairly strong inroads into the Iron Curtain countries. The Baptist people have made a lot of progress. The Pentecostals are quite strong in Czechoslovakia and also in some of these other areas. The Adventists are working very hard and have had fairly good success there. The Jehovah Witnesses are also very heavily involved in each of these areas. So we have enough interest there in the denominational groups and yet at this time we see the people are starting to question the things that they have been taught by the denominations. They are starting to have an awakening interest in returning to the New Testament more strictly.

Hacker: Could you give us your opinion of the relationship between the cultural and the economical background of these people and how it may be influencing your work?

Curtis: Of course in Austria the people have a strong cultural tie to the days of the emperors. You still see the influence of Franz Joseph and Maria Theresa. The people are very class conscious and title conscious. If a person is a professor, he is very well respected. If he's got a doctor's degree, then he becomes "Professor Doctor" and he is even more highly respected. If a man is a "Professor Doctor" and you address him any other way than "Professor Doctor," you are in trouble. They want other people to know they have these qualifications.

Economically, their monthly average income is around \$80 and of course their cost of living is roughly the same as it is here in America. This means they have to live very simple lives. They eat a very basic diet. Most of the people don't eat very much meat, and they have a strong bread and potato diet. This is even more pronounced in some of these Iron Curtain countries. Take Czechoslovakia for instance where we have been more actively involved. The fact that the Russians have been making such demands from the country politically and also economically has pretty well sapped the country of its resources. It is very difficult for these people to get foodstuffs and consumer products. We find a real problem there. Yet, when we go over to visit

with them--just stop by to say hello or maybe talk to them a little bit--they insist that we stay with them for meals and invariably they will come up with a very nice tasty meat dish although it may mean that they don't have anything to eat, relatively speaking, for several weeks perhaps.

Robinson: What have been some of the biggest obstacles to overcome in your work?

Curtis: I think the attitude, or you could say prejudice, because of the Catholic background is probably our biggest difficulty. Many of the people have their minds closed. They have been taught all of their lives: "don't listen to these things; don't read your Bible; don't pay any attention to what sects, so to speak, are teaching." It has closed their minds to our appeal. Now, this is especially true in Austria. We are finding that perhaps because of the oppression that the people are living under in the Communist countries they are looking for something that is more tangible, something that they can hold to other than the false promises that they have heard from their governments. We have had it expressed to us that these people are now being deceived and hurt by the promises and they are turning some place else. This seems to be to Christ.

Hacker: What methods are you now using that are most effective?

Curtis: The most effective tool that we have found in the last few years has been in the evangelistic paper called Des Feste Fundament that we produce. It has five basic gospel sermons each month. We make this available to anyone that would like to have it on a regular basis. We send it out in mass to a city and then those that want it on a continuing basis send in a response card and we put them on our mailing list. As soon as we can, we try to get to them on a personal basis. This has become more or less the key to our work as far as getting new contacts and keeping those contacts alive with good strong gospel sermons and printed material that can help them to be thinking all of the time until we can get to them personally.

We have tried the correspondence course approach before and it hasn't been quite as effective as we would like for it to be and so we turned to the paper and found it more effective. Currently we are planning on getting the correspondence course back in gear. Brother Dieter Alten in Germany has written a new revised correspondence course that we will be using.

Robinson: You mentioned that you send this out in mass to various cities. Would you explain how you decide on which addresses to send it to? Do you have a mass mailing type thing or what is it?

Curtis: So far when we have done this we have sent them to every household in the city because then we know that that city has been covered. We have a representative idea of the city. Up until now we have only sent it to cities that this was feasible in. We have never covered the entire city of Vienna, but when we get ready to do that Vienna is divided into 23 distinct districts and we will just cover one district at a time. This gives us an idea of where the interest is. For instance, before we started the work in Klagenfurt, we made a mass send out to the entire city and because of the degree of response that we saw there we knew there was a justification for further efforts. We had a gospel meeting and visited personally all of these contacts. We saw enough interest to justify talking to someone about coming to start

the work there. We have found this to be an excellent springboard to establish a new work. We are seeing again a rising interest in the city of Lenz. We are starting to consider the possibility of a mass send out to cover the entire city and then if the interest seems good enough we will make a thrust to evangelizing that city.

Robinson: Now can you just tell the post office in a certain city you want to send this particular item to every person or every address?

Curtis: We can do this or there is a firm there that guarantees a 99% coverage by taking it from door to door. They are quite reasonable. We can do it either way. We prefer to do it through the post office because it goes to their mailbox. If we have it handed out by hand, they put it in a slot in the door just like all advertising and people don't seem to regard it quite as seriously.

Robinson: Now what about some methods that you have tried and have proven not very usable?

Curtis: That is a little bit difficult for me to answer. I've not been there but two and a half years now. Like I said a moment ago we have tried the correspondence course and found it not to be extremely effective. Yet we feel like it may be because of the approach at the time, maybe some other circumstances, or we just didn't go about it right. As far as any one method that we have ever tried that we think just doesn't work, I don't know of any. The situation there is flexible enough that I think that most approaches that would work any place else would have some merit to them.

Hacker: What do you think of special approaches such as groups? You said that you had a group that went to Vienna and also things such as evangelistic campaigns and other special types of evangelistic methods.

Curtis: Well, I think that there are some very definite advantages to groups. However, our group or the group that went over that I outlined a moment ago found that there were some problems involved. Sometimes there were some personality conflicts of sorts and sometimes there was more of an overlap than they would like to have had. This is one reason that the fellows started branching out and going to other places. They felt like it was more or less a waste of man power sometimes because they would get in each other's way or maybe they would disagree on certain basic things and spend more time talking about it than they did in actually doing things about it.

As far as campaigns, of course, we have only had one campaign in Vienna as far as I know since the work was started. This was in 1958, one year after Brother Hare was there. Some of our most faithful Christians came from that campaign effort. We are planning this next summer, of course, for another effort of this nature. I feel like this is a method we need to use more effectively.

Robinson: Do you have any Austrian preachers and what are you doing to train converts with regard to fill in responsible positions of leadership in the church?

Curtis: At the present time there is one Austrian Christian working full time for the church in Vienna. He is fully supported by the church in Vienna. As far as I know, this is the only case of this in Europe right now.

We don't have a training school in Vienna as such to prepare someone who is interested in preaching. We have encouraged them perhaps to take advantage of the Pepper-

dine program in Heidelberg, but as of yet no one has ever done this. I might mention that we are thinking very seriously about a training program of sorts for the people behind the Iron Curtain. This will be done in German and we will invite those that already speak German because of some of the other limitations. Of course, if we do this, we will make it available to those from Austria or Germany that would like to take advantage of this. We will make it probably, as plans are going now, on a three month basis, mainly because the people from the Iron Curtain countries just can't stay out any longer than that because of governmental restrictions.

Hacker: You mentioned having an Austrian national as a preacher supported by the Austrians. What has been your experience and observation about American support for national preachers in Austria?

Curtis: My personal experience along that line has indicated to me that this is probably not the best approach for several reasons. A lot of times the natives have a little bit of trouble understanding why we would do something like this. Most of the time the natives feel that perhaps even the American preachers may be over supported although our costs are considerably higher and when the principle is put to it, it is generally not the case. If there is any feeling of jealousy or animosity, it tends to accentuate these things.

We have talked to the brethren in Vienna about it and their personal feeling is that they would almost rather not have any national preachers than have them supported from the outside. They are willing to try to make the sacrifices necessary to do it themselves. Of course, we encourage this because we want to see them as soon as possible sending their own missionaries out. We feel that if they become too dependent upon the American churches that this won't happen, and we know it is a basic characteristic that if someone else will do it for us we will tend not to do it for ourselves. We've leaned backwards trying to avoid this type thing.

Robinson: What about language and language training in your efforts there?

Curtis: Of course, we speak German in Vienna and the possibilities of language training are excellent. There are many different possibilities there. There are several language schools. The University of Vienna has excellent programs for the foreigner. We found that by far the fastest and most effective way, and this is my personal opinion, for someone coming in who wants to learn German is to go to one of the Goethe Institutes in Germany. There are 22 of these scattered over the country, and they have their sessions divided into two month sessions in various levels. They have an excellent program which is quite reasonable as far as the financial angle is concerned. I don't feel there is any place that I have had contact with that is any better. We recommend generally that missionaries coming over go there first and get some training and then come into the field.

Robinson: Would you say that a person planning to go over, if he is going to have to be supported by a congregation, would do well to go on to Austria and get his training there or in Germany rather than trying to get training in the States?

Curtis: Yes, I do. I have not ever seen a German teacher in one of our colleges here who was really sufficiently trained unless it was a German native who just happened to be here for awhile. It is just too specialized. Then too there is a motivation involved. When you are over there studying, you are constantly exposed to the language.

When you have to say, "Pass the butter," in German or you don't get the butter, this tends to make you want to learn it. It is an extra incentive to learn the language, and I feel it is the fastest way. You are not learning your mistakes. They correct you from the very beginning. I suggest very strongly that they go ahead although it does cost some money for a period of time that seems relatively unproductive, I think it gets them into the language with a firmer foothold much faster over the long range.

Hacker: I would like to ask you a double barrel question now. What has been your greatest problem in gaining support and what do you see as the greatest problem you have in keeping your support?

Curtis: Of course, the main problem in getting it is just the fact it seems like so many times here in the States congregations are building church buildings. They either have got plans on their bulletin board for a church building; they've got construction under way or they have just finished and they are so heavily in debt that they can't do anything else. That to me is the main obstacle. Although I am not against church buildings, I am somewhat against the over emphasis that we seem to be placing on them. Gaining support for me was a lot harder than I thought it would be. Of course, I came out of a business field, and I felt like after making some pretty strong sacrifices in selling things at a loss and all that, people would take this as an extra impetus and would want to support us, but I found that that didn't make too much difference. The biggest problem is just finding a congregation that just happens to have it available.

As far as keeping our support I feel that the key to keeping support is reporting. If the brethren know that you are doing the work, if they know what is happening and know that it is justifiable to keep you there, I feel that they will come through with the support. We have found this to be true on several occasions. When, because of circumstances the support would drop, the fact that people knew about the work has made them willing to come across with the necessary support.

Robinson: What have you learned that might help us improve our over-all mission effort in the church?

Curtis: Here again I think I could almost say that proper reporting is as much a key to this as anything. I find that when the brethren here know of the details--I mean the problems you have and the results you are having in specifics--that they are a lot more interested than we sometimes give them credit for. In answer to this same question I feel that the training programs that we are having are excellent, but I feel that one thing that could probably improve in general as much as any other thing would be to see to it that the men who are sent are mature. By mature I don't mean just spiritually mature although generally if they are spiritually mature this covers some other areas too. I feel that it is very urgent that men have their marriage on a very firm basis and that they have made some adjustments that they have to make, say during the first couple of years, that these are behind them. If a mate is having problems making the adjustments to marriage and on top of that are piled all of the problems of a new mission field, this makes both areas problematic. So this idea of maturity and being really an adult, although he might be 18 years old and be this mature--that's kind of rare--I would much rather see a congregation take a man, put him under a good eldership and watch him and help him to mature then send him. I think this would be good.

Hacker: As you think about your work in Austria, what do you see in the future as far as your plans are concerned?

Curtis: We are trying to do all that we can to support and push what we think is a restoration movement in the strictest sense of the word in not only Austria but in these other countries that we have mentioned. We are going to try some more new methods that we have not yet tried. One thing that we have just started is a tape recording service whereby we tape record our sermons and provide a small playback recorder for people who are in remote areas that can't get to assemblies. We also plan on putting out a tract in the very near future called "How to Start a New Testament Church in Your Home" and try to really encourage people to come up with this idea even though they may be in an area where there are very few people interested and that if there are only two that is enough to start a New Testament church. These are two new areas of thrust that we are right now in the process of instigating, and we seem to have a large amount of interest in both of them.

Hacker: Gwynneth, we want to express to you our appreciation for taking the time to give us this interview. We are very happy to have you and your family on our campus today and are glad that you have been able to speak to our students. We want to wish you the best in your work and let you know that we are anxious to help you any way that we can and wish you Godspeed as our prayers go with you when you return to Austria.