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Interview of Keith Robinson

Keith Robinson

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Keith Robinson who has been in mission work in Rome, Italy, for over ten years and who served as Visiting Professor of Missions at Harding College in 1969-70 was interviewed by Winfred Wright on June 5, 1970.

Wright: Keith, could you give us a brief historical outline of your work in Rome from the beginning up until the present time?

Robinson: The work began in a village south of Rome in a place called Frascati that probably most of the members of the church are familiar with. It was begun by a group of workers led primarily by Harold Paden. In the group was his brother, Cline. The original group consisted of nine workers. They went to the little village of Frascati and opened an orphan's home in the beginning. The group actually broke up within the first couple of years because of the need of workers in other parts of Italy. A great number of requests came for aid in teaching and studying the Bible from all over Italy. This was actually the beginning of all the different work in Italy.

It was probably, as I recall from what I've read and from what others have told me, about 1951 before they actually started the work in Rome, primarily because of the terrific volume of work that they had in reaching out to the people who were sending in requests from all over Italy. They had a lot of publicity from the closing of their orphan's home and other activities. This was in the national papers and magazines. This was the first boost that the work had. This is where they got their contacts and this is the way that the men from Frascati spread out all over Italy. So, in 1951, they went to Rome.

Brother Cline Paden was primarily responsible for the work beginning in Rome. In 1954, Gerald Paden, another one of Cline and Harold's brothers came to Rome. He worked there until 1959 when we went there. There was one congregation which had purchased their own meeting place with the help of American brethren when we went there in 1959. We stayed there from 1959 until 1966 by ourselves. We came back to the States and recruited a number of other workers. In the meantime we started another congregation. Two years ago we started the third congregation in Rome. There are presently--well when the Bill Burtons and I return--eight American evangelists and two Italian evangelists in the city of Rome. All over Italy there are I would say about 20 to 25 Italian evangelists. There are about 50 congregations and probably 15 and maybe 18 full time American evangelists in Italy presently.

Wright: How would you evaluate the position of the church in general?

Robinson: I think the church is doing quite well in Italy. I might be somewhat prejudiced but it seems to me that the work of evangelization in Italy is ahead of any work that we are doing in Europe. I think this is probably because we have more workers. We've had less of a turnover of workers. We have a number of experienced

workers in Italy who have stayed on. We have some very fine and very qualified Italian evangelists which give us a big advantage, I think. It seems to me also that with respect to what the church has been in the past that we are at the threshold of the greatest opportunity we have ever had. Italy, being the homeland of Catholicism and with all the rebellion that is in the Catholic Church today, we have a tremendous opportunity it seems to me.

Wright: You've already referred to the city of Rome being the seat of Catholicism. What is the general religious background of the people with whom you work and how does this background affect your approach?

Robinson: Naturally the mass of the people are Catholic by birth. They are sprinkled when they are a few days old by the priest. However, their religious sentiment tends more toward atheism or just general apathy. This would probably be true in a large part of western Europe. They are not deeply spiritual people as a general rule. Southern Italy will have more of a traditional Catholic and hold more to the religion and will be more fervent. From Rome north the people are pretty apathetic. The truth about the matter is a great number of Italians are anti-clerical and anti-Catholic in their leanings. This is seen by the fact that we have a tremendously large Communist Party in Italy. It is the second largest political party and gets almost a third of all of the votes. This indicates how anti-Catholic a number of Italians are. This doesn't, as it might appear, always work to our advantage. Personally the best members of the church presently in Italy are the people who were most strongly religious before we contacted them. It is very difficult to work with apathetic people. Catholicism has taken a lot out of people--the spark of spiritual values and it is hard to re-ignite this.

Wright: What is the culture and economic background of the people with whom you work?

Robinson: Culturally, of course, you have our basic western culture. In fact, our great contributors to what is our basic western culture is through the Roman influence of the olden days and of course the Romans from the Greeks. The Italians are very proud of their cultural background, and I think justly so. The level of public instruction is not as high as it is in America, but the quality of the instruction that they get is superior to what we have. What I am saying is that on an average not as many Italians have as high an education as we would have in America, but those who do obtain say a high school education considerably have a better quality of education than our high school students would have. In the arts, this would be pretty much true on the college level, but not so much true though they excel also in a number of scientific fields.

Economically, Italy is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. I just read the other day that as far as rate of growth they were third behind Japan and Germany. We've seen a tremendous change in just the ten years that we've been there. They are fast becoming a middle class society. This doesn't work to our advantage either necessarily. There has been a great deal of inflation because of too rapid growth. There is still a pretty poor lower middle class of people. Yet, the people are becoming more and more affluent and more and more attached to the things. As an indication of this, when we first went, we could hold a meeting and advertise very little and fill up our little halls with 65 to 100 people. Now we can advertise all we want to and get 5 or 10 people to come. I think this is an indication of the increased affluency probably.

Wright: A lot of the Christians that make up your congregation now, do they tend to come from one level of society or is there a pretty good cross section?

Robinson: The majority of the members of the church in Italy would be from the middle class, the working class people. We have been able to reach other classes, but these are the exception. In Rome we have one man and his wife both of whom have higher degrees. His wife has a Ph.D. degree and he has what would be similar to our BA degree. We have some businessmen, most of them are the new rich-like what has developed in America in the last twenty years--people who are very common in background but they have moved to the city and have had a lot of initiative and made good. We have some of those. In other places in Italy we have some medical doctors, a few school teachers and things of this sort.

Wright: What serious challenges have you had to overcome in your work in Rome?

Robinson: I suppose the most serious challenges that we have had have been personal challenges. Mission work wasn't what we thought it was going to be. We didn't have a very good concept of what we were supposed to be doing when we arrived. It turned out to be very mundane and very unadventurous, very difficult work. This probably was one of the most serious challenges in our life. We've had a little difficulty at the beginning with the Italian government, but these are the kind of challenges that really don't bother you very much because you are able to face up to them. I feel that the personal challenges of adjusting to a new kind of life and adjusting to disappointment in lot of cases are by far the greatest challenges.

Wright: In thinking about methods of mission work, have you tried any special approaches to mission work in Rome?

Robinson: We have tried nearly all of the basic things--gospel meetings, advertising, newspaper--and in the past few years we have done a great deal of Bible correspondence courses which is not new. It has, by the way, proved fairly effective in Italy.

We got the idea from David Lavender's group of young people of organizing an Italian group of young people and I think this proved very effective in doing campaign work. We sing in the public square and preach--I guess we would call it street corner preaching--which has proved very effective. We've been instrumental in starting some congregations with this method. I think it has proved more effective in our case because we have used Italian young people. We sing and we preach and then we have a long discussion period. Of course, the Italian young people are able to do this. It has certainly proved very effective in causing these Italian young people to mature. We feel that this has been one of the best things that we've done in recent years.

Now, we are working on developing a campaign system as a follow up method. We used it last summer and experimented some with it. We are quite satisfied with the results. We have all of these thousands of people in the Bible correspondence course, but it is difficult to contact them. We found that all of the Italian people like to get out in the summer time. They responded very favorably to our invitation to come to our Bible camp. We are going to develop this and use the Bible camp as an evangelization tool and not just as a tool for our own young people or our own Christians.

Wright: I know that in Italy there has been some experience with a Bible Chair arrangement. What is your evaluation of this as an evangelistic approach?

Robinson: I really wouldn't be the one to evaluate it very well perhaps. I think that I am well pleased with the results primarily because of the person connected with it, Brother Fausto Salvoni. I think that some of the biggest advantages have been side advantages such as the material that he has produced in studying and working with the Bible Chair. The Bible Chair itself personally seems to me not to be advantageous because of the lack of recognition on the part of the officials. It is a Bible Chair without any recognition. We are just not able to attract enough people to it. In other words, if the money were just being spent for that, to support a man full time who was just doing that, it would seem to me not to be a very effective method. I think that something of this nature could be worked out with some young people or some older people or whoever might be interested in it but young people it would seem would fit best with young people. With young people attending maybe for some graduate degree, some of the universities in Italy--young people from America who have their BA and maybe their Masters and want to go on and do some work--I can see how they could go to the school and maybe make some contacts that they could work with on the side. But a Bible Chair situation without any recognition is pretty difficult.

Wright: You mentioned in the beginning of our conversation your experiences in Italy with Frascati orphan's home. I understand that this orphan's home doesn't function any more. What other methods have you used in Italy that have proved to be ineffective or that for some reason or another you have abandoned?

Robinson: I suppose probably the biggest change of direction was involved also with Frascati orphan's home and it has to do with benevolent work. The work was primarily started, of course, after the war. A lot of people were homeless and there was a lot of poverty. This was the thinking behind the establishing of the orphan's home. A lot of benevolent work was done. Unfortunately, most of the people who were converted on the basis of that are not today members of the church. They came for the fish and the loaves and left when the meal was over. I think we have pretty much revamped our ideas on benevolent work in the mission field. We still do benevolent work on a much more limited basis. We try as much as possible to do it on a self help type basis such things as maybe trying to help young people get through school so they can help themselves or something of this nature instead of handouts in clothing and food. I think this is a method that we've had to re-evaluate. I wouldn't say that we have abandoned it, but we've had to re-evaluate it and we found some very distinct advantages in this work.

Wright: What are you doing towards training the Italian people to carry on their own work?

Robinson: Other than our training program in the local congregations, we have the Florence Bible School which has functioned for about ten years. I believe it started the year I went to Italy. Recently, about four years ago, we revamped our thinking on this also. We are not concentrating on training young men and women in the Bible, but we insist pretty much that they also continue their secular training. We feel that this will give us people in the future who can fill their places in the community

and have good Bible background and fairly well rooted in the scriptures. Then, of course, the young men who want to preach will be capable of preaching. At least we will have some good foundation for preachers if they want to. When we were just teaching them the Bible, it was almost a necessity that they preach when they got out because they weren't qualified to make a living for themselves. Then it was necessary for us to go out and look for support for them in other places because the Italian congregations, for the most part, are not able to support them or are unwilling to support them at least. We feel like now these young men will take their place in the congregation and when the congregations do start looking for preachers they will have them. This is the biggest emphasis that we have with regard to training the Italians today to take on their own work.

Wright: What is your feeling toward American support for Italian preachers?

Robinson: I think we made a mistake in the beginning. For one thing I think we too quickly tried to find support for men whom we were not sure of, but in our haste to have some Italian preachers we looked for support for some. We regretted this afterwards. Of course, this is not saying anything against Italians for the Italian brethren. We have this problem in America, of course, of unfaithful ministers of the gospel. We've had some of this experience in Italy. We have some of the finest men that I know of anywhere who are presently preaching and are supported by Americans. I think this is a tactical error.

My evaluation would be that in any new mission field that it be looked at very carefully for a long time before outside support is sought for preachers. I think I would prefer to train them in the Bible and help them finish their secular education if necessary and then when the churches grow we will have part time preachers first and then we will have full time preachers when they are capable of doing this. I would like to add also, however, that the solution to this problem is not to cut these people off that we have been supporting for years if they have been faithfully preaching the gospel. This has been one of the solutions that has been offered. I think this is unchristian in the first place. We have men now 50 or 55 years old who have been preaching the gospel for 20 years in Italy and doing a good job of it. They are very faithful and all of a sudden brethren tell them they are going to stop their support. I think this is unchristian on our part. I think we owe them the consideration of who they are and what they are doing. They can't get a job; they can't support their families now. That's not a reason for supporting someone but it is a good reason for continuing the support of people who are in this position. Maybe it's not their fault. I would with regard to these people we are supporting now, use them as we consider missionaries. Send them out to start new congregations and just don't propagate the error.

Wright: Keith, you've been out trying to raise some additional support for your work in Italy. What is your general evaluation of the American church and its attitude toward supporting the mission work in Europe and Italy specifically?

Robinson: Well, Europe and Italy, in the mind of the brotherhood, has, shall we say, lost prestige as far as mission work is concerned. This is understandable. It is regrettable that our brethren are not yet educated to the point of really understanding what mission work is all about and we sort of hop from field to field looking for ripe fields and where a lot of people are being baptized. We haven't

gotten down to the nitty-gritty of evangelizing people yet. Notwithstanding this I've been received quite well. It is difficult to raise support today in a lot of senses. This is wonderful because more and more people are seeking support and more and more congregations are looking for support. Europe is, as I've said, a mission field that most of our brethren feel is not a very fruitful field and not a very receptive field. Then others feel like we've already been doing a lot. There is difficulty.

Wright: In closing our conversation today, could you summarize briefly your general philosophy of missions?

Robinson: My general philosophy of missions means to evangelize and that we can and should preach the gospel to every creature. I think that we've not been trying to do this. I think we have been trying to establish churches when we should have been trying to discover methods and ways of evangelizing people. This is why brethren ought not be discouraged with the work in Italy or in Europe or other fields which are less fruitful as far as numbers of people being baptized are concerned. We ought to be concerned with how we are going to go about preaching to millions of people, and we've not been very concerned about that. We are concerned about how many people we can baptize and we get so involved in that that we forget about preaching to people. I think just a summary of my evaluation would be to preach the gospel to everyone that hasn't heard it. If we are having difficulty doing that, try to get our heads together to think how we can better do it.

Wright: Thank you for sharing your experiences and your ideas with us. We have enjoyed having you on the Harding campus this year. We pray God's blessings upon you as you continue to preach the gospel.