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Interview of Rees Bryant

Rees Bryant

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Rees Bryant who has been engaged in evangelistic work in Nigeria for about five and a half years and who for several years has been engaged in full time preaching or in Christian education was interviewed by Winfred Wright on June 5, 1970.

Wright: We are happy to have you with us today to share some of your experiences, some of your insight into missions. Would you begin by giving us a brief historical outline of the work in Nigeria and your participation in it?

Bryant: I am happy to be here. I appreciate this opportunity. I will try to remember the outline. So far as churches of Christ in America knows, the beginning of our potential involvement in Nigeria was with the conversion of C. A. O. Essien, a Nigerian policeman, who was converted through Bible correspondence work in 1945. Essien desired to know more about the Bible. He was taking the correspondence course from a school in Germany. He penned a note on the correspondence course asking a lady in Germany could she give him information about Bible correspondence work. She happened to know about the Lawrence Avenue church in Nashville which was offering Bible correspondence work then. Essien took the course, was converted, and it wasn't long until several thousand people had been baptized there.

Letters began coming to the Lawrence Avenue church begging for brethren to come over and help. Many were being baptized but these Nigerians felt they needed to know the way more perfectly. Eldred Echols and Boyd Reece madetrips to Nigeria and were there briefly about 1950 and 1951 just for a few weeks. In December, 1952, Howard Horton and James Johnson went as the first long term missionaries from the United States. They found a movement there, probably about 10,000 strong by that time, and many men already preaching. They began village preaching and a three months' training program for these people. I can't remember all of the various Americans who went but in the early days Eugene Paden, Lucien Palmer, Bernie Bawcom, Wendell Broom, Billy Nicks, Leonard Johnson, and Sewell Hall.

Billy Nicks decided to go up into Ibo land. Our work began there really among the Ibibio people and there was a great receptivity to the gospel at the time of the beginning of the work. Palmer and other brethren, in addition to evangelistic work in helping to build up the local congregation and training the preachers, had opportunity to work in elementary education. This provided a fertile field that has continued until this day. Billy Nicks went up into Ibo land and established a Bible training college at a place called Onichia. Many congregations were developed in this particular area. I may be giving too long a history of the work. Bill Nicks, James Massey, Doug Lawyer, Bill Curry, Dayton Keese, Gaston Tarbet, Windle Kee, Henry Farrar and I have taught at Onickia Ngwa. I may have overlooked someone, but these are the American brethren who taught in that situation.

Most of the work, of course, has been done by the Nigerian brethren who are able to go out into all these villages and market places. We American brethren have done what we could, but the heat of the day has been borne by faithful brethren who just simply preach all the time. They have early classes. They have what they call morning prayers where they workship about 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning. Then they

go out in the market places preaching. All together the Lord has blessed the work there. Before the recent war there were around 600 congregations with around 60,000 members. I am happy to report that the church there has grown actually, not only spiritually, but probably numerically during the recent conflict. I believe the church has been tested by fire in Nigeria and is strong today. Perhaps this is a brief synopsis of it.

Wright: I think it would be good if you would comment a little further on the present status of the church, particularly among the Ibibio peoples.

Bryant: I will be happy to do that. First, among the Ibibio people, Wendell Broom has conducted a survey among them. As of February 2, 1970, in response to a questionnaire that he sent out, he heard from 278 congregations among the Ibibio people. At that time there were 44,513 people attending. This gave an average of around 160 people in attendance per congregation. A letter I received dated 28 May, 1970, from Steven Okoronkwo who has recently returned to the Ibo people states that he has heard from 51 churches in Ibo land. Of course, we have been out of contact with these churches for nearly three years. He says there are 3,675 in attendance at these 51 congregations. That gives about 72 per church. Steven states that the majority of the preachers and members in Ibo land are still loyal to the New Testament teaching. I am thankful to God for their faith. I know of many cases in which individual Christians have gone through terrible things during the war and they are faithful today. I would have been very encouraged to have heard, "Well, we have half as many members as we had before the war, but they are stronger." Or, "They still just barely believe." If I could have heard that the quality of their spiritual relationship was good, I would have been encouraged. I don't believe in numbers for numbers sake, but when I hear of many thousands of people who have not denied the faith during these circumstances I am very encouraged.

Wright: What part of your approach or methods which have been used in Nigeria, do you feel have specifically contributed to this stability of faith and practice?

Bryant: God alone knows. In my judgment I think the Bible Training College has been the most effective tool in this stabilization. At Ukpom and Onichia Ngwa we have had three year programs where men study the Bible intensely. Then they go back out into their villages. I think this has been the main thing.

Wright: Have these schools been principally for training of preachers or have they been training generally church leaders?

Bryant: No. The Bible training colleges have been basically preacher training schools. A man comes in and studies with us for two years, goes out into the field for a year, comes for his third year, and then goes out as a preacher.

Wright: While we are talking about your school and your preachers, perhaps this would be a good time to go ahead and talk about the support of them. How do you feel about using American funds to support the native preachers?

Bryant: Well, my feeling on that varies with the situation. I don't have a cut and dry approach on this that I think it has all got to be this way or that way. I don't think there is one Biblical pattern for these situations. Whether I am preaching here, or whether I am preaching up in Canada or whether I am preaching

somewhere else, wherever I am a native of, wherever my support comes from depends on various things. I think it is a mistake to try to just use some one. Say we are going to evangelize the whole world with fully supported people from anywhere or that we don't have any need for fully supported people or that the only person that can preach in Arkansas is somebody who gets his support from Arkansas. Obviously we don't have a Bible commandment for that kind of approach.

Wright: What have you done in Nigeria?

Bryant: We have used all kinds of different approaches. There are men in Nigeria who make tents and support themselves like Paul did part of the time. There are men in Nigeria who have been fully supported by their congregations. There are men who have been supported by American money. Some of them fully supported by American money are doing basically evangelistic work, going on out and establishing other congregations. Our general approach with a man who has served as what we call a full time local preacher has been that the Nigerian congregation provides part of his support, maybe a half in the beginning and through various programs we've had of American aid then we would provide the other half, say for six months and then we would gradually begin cutting it back and hope to develop self supporting churches.

In Ibo land we did have 35 or 40, I think, fully preacher supporting congregations. I think we've made some progress in the right direction there. I am very encouraged by the fact that when the war broke out--and these people have just been through living hell over there during the war--these men who had received some amounts of American aid didn't simply melt away and go back to the devil or back to paganism. They have continued to preach and we are very grateful about this.

I am sure we made some mistakes. We sometimes supported men that ought not be supported, but that's the way it is here in the States. Sometimes men are not worthy of support and they receive it. I think it is Norvel Young that makes the statement that a preacher is either the most overpaid or underpaid man in the community just depending on the type fellow he is.

Wright: What is the general economic level of the people with whom you worked?

Bryant: Nigeria is a very underdeveloped country economically in comparison with the United States or Europe even. The average annual income of the people there is about \$80 and that was before the war. The southeastern part of Nigeria where we did our work has been reduced during this war to mass starvation. Over 2,000,000 people have starved to death, most of them children. Since the war has concluded about another half million have starved. Villages have been wiped out, they've been burned, large cities have been destroyed and the economic level has lowered, of course, for that area. They are in a period of re-construction now. These people are about as low on the economic scale right now as you can find people anywhere.

Wright: What are the general religious beliefs of the people in that area and how has their religious beliefs affected your approach?

Bryant: Nigeria is a big place and the religions vary. The north is Islamic and that's about 20 million people. The south is divided into two areas, the west and

the east. Animism, I suppose, is the basic religion and then there are various forms of Christianity. I guess Catholicism is probably the strongest, then the Anglicans, the Methodists and then various groups like the Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witness, and the Baptists are strong in the western region but not where we were. Various indigenous groups, I would call them, really indigenous like the National Church of Nigeria in the Camerouns and the Cherubim and Seraphim which just really sprung up from their own emotional need and their own pagan background with a little Christianity mixed in with it. Then with all of this, especially before the war, and I suppose it will come back with the introduction of western standards, a new type of secularism was a new religion for the people who could get some training in education and the money to finance it.

Wright: What specific challenges have you had to overcome in your work in Nigeria?

Bryant: Well, for an American, of course, there is a kind of cultural shock almost any where we go. There, the shock of living in an underdeveloped country, the challenge of being isolated, being way off in a remote mission station, loneliness, the challenge of--even before you leave the States--hypocriticism. There is a health challenge over there too because this is a tropical climate. We live five degrees above the equator and about 100 feet above sea level. I guess we have summer all the time. Then where we lived you had to boil your drinking water. You had to sleep under mosquito nets. The climate is innovating. The typical missionary goes out there with a head of steam. He gets on the field and sees the rest of the fellows that have been there a year or two and he wonders why they are so lazy. He goes in like a ball of fire for about six months and then he comes down with his first real hard case of malaria or amoebic dysentery or something that gets him real hard and then he slows down and probably does a more effective work after he doesn't go flashing around so fast.

Wright: We have already talked a little bit about your Bible training school program. What other methods are you using now for evangelism in Nigeria?

Bryant: The Bible correspondence course is going to be reactivated. These Bible training colleges are being reactivated. The preaching of the brethren on the local level right now is the main evangelistic tool. We do have some training programs. I think one that maybe a lot of people don't know about is an elementary school system there in which we are given the privilege of providing the supervisor. In that program we have 2,944 children on the elementary level who study the Bible daily. The typical preacher in a village will also be teaching the Bible in one of these schools. In a way this is evangelistic work you see. We also have what we call a Bible Chair program for the want of a better name. The schools I mentioned a few moments ago, we have 12 schools under our oversight where we teach these 2,944. We also are allowed to put Bible teachers in public schools that are not under our supervision. We have 12,500 studying the Bible daily there. We have also a secondary school. The Nigerian Christian Secondary School at Ukpom teaches children up through what is the first year of college here in the States. We have 569 studying in that school now. We have really made good progress. It is providing and will provide for the Nigerian churches the kind of leaders that the Christian colleges in the States are providing for the churches here.

Wright: What methods have you used that proved to be so ineffective that you abandoned them?

Bryant: I don't know whether we have used any that have been all that ineffective. I'm not saying that we know every time what we ought to do. Sometime we just get tired of one and shift our attention somewhere else like human beings will. Basically we preach the gospel and train these people and try to render some benevolence among them.

Wright: What about your medical missionaries in Nigeria? Were you there during the time of their presence?

Bryant: Yes. I am very happy they came. We wrote almost a constant stream of letters back to the United States begging people to come. From the very first day I was there, I saw the need for medical missionaries. I hadn't thought of this at all before I went over. It just hadn't ever occurred to me except maybe I had read about Schwitzer. I didn't really know what Nigeria was like. The first day I was there, on the way down to a Bible class at the Bible Training College, a man came on the campus with a strangulated hernia. His people wanted help. The man died on the operating table that afternoon at the nearest hospital. It was operated by the medical missionaries of Mary. Patty and I both began thinking that we should have some Christian doctors. We wrote letters to lots of people. Between tours one time somebody told us about Dr. Farrar. I never had heard of Henry Farrar before. We got in touch with Henry. He wanted to go to either India or Nigeria. I tried to persuade Henry to go to Nigeria. Ultimately he did come. Henry and I lived next door to each other for two and a half years. I was able to help and did devote a good deal of my time during my third tour to helping get the Nigerian Christian Hospital established. That hospital did a very good work in Nigeria in my judgment. Henry is there right now. I don't know whether you know. He is making a three weeks trip to try to re-open the hospital.

Wright: That's good. We heard recently of his continued interest.

Bryant: We had a 50 bed hospital at the close of the war. Henry was practicing good medicine. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday he saw about 150 people in his out patient clinic. Then the war broke out and we had to stop it.

Wright: What has been your greatest problem and what is the greatest problem today in gaining and keeping support for mission work?

Bryant: I'm not sure I know. If we can just let people hear about it, then they respond in a favorable way. It is hard to communicate some time. Basically I think we are not doing any more in mission work, brotherhood-wise, just because of loving the world more than we love God. Sometimes racial prejudices enter into it. We are real verbal. I am seeing how verbal I am this morning. I didn't think I had anything to say. Sometimes we like to talk a whole lot about it and not get right down to doing it, planning the program and backing it and actually getting out there.

Wright: You had gotten a right good response, did you not, for the benevolent assistance to the Ibos following the civil war strike?

Bryant: Yes, I think we did. We touched the hem of the garment so far as the big problem was concerned. Brethren did respond generously to it. I think we don't really know very much about how to do benevolent work. I think we are learning. I guess it is Alan Bryan who says we are all anti-orphan. We don't really get around to doing very much of it. Right now we are taking care of 40 orphans at Ukpom. We are distributing some relief on a very limited basis. I hope we are doing it wisely in Nigeria.

Wright: In closing out our conversation today, what would you suggest for the improvement of mission work in general in the brotherhood?

Bryant: We need better training of the missionaries. We need more local congregations in the United States that really see that the purpose of the church is to spread the gospel. We need more elders who see the spiritual purpose of the church rather than just being kind of a board of directors that have a budget and they want to keep you out. They don't want the boat to be rocked. Of course, dedication to God and Christ, and putting Jesus Christ first is the main thing.

Wright: Let me ask you one further question. It is a real general one. I will ask you to summarize your response rather briefly. What is your general philosophy of missions?

Bryant: My general philosophy is that a person that has been saved by the grace of God and goes out with the gospel of Christ and loves the people will reach the people. He might have ten Ph.D.'s in anthropology and sociology and linguistics and all the rest of it--mission methods even--but if he didn't have the real message and if he didn't really love the people, he wouldn't reach them. Although I am for training and I've emphasized that several times, the love of the people and the right message, this is my basic philosophy of reaching them. With the help of God we can reach them.

Wright: Thank you Brother Bryant for sharing with us your ideas and your devotion to Christ and to spreading the gospel.