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Interview of Mitchell Greer

Mitchell Greer

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HARDING COLLEGE LIVING LIBRARY OF MISSIONS

This is Volume II, No. 2 of the Harding College Living History of Missions. I am Joe Hacker and I am interviewing Mitchell Greer who is now working at Abilene Christian College and in former days has been active in mission work in Europe and is still interested in this work overseas.

Hacker: Brother Greer, I wonder if you would give us a brief historical outline of the work that you have been doing in missions from the beginning of that work until now?

Greer: We were one of the first three families to enter the country of Sweden in 1957. The three families went together to the capital city of Stockholm. The Payne Haddox and the Dan Billingsley families and my family worked together there for several years. The Haddox family returned after almost a couple of years to the States. The Billingsley family went on with the work in Stockholm for some time. My family returned to the States for a brief visit in the early part of 1960 and then took another family back with us to begin the second work in Gothenburg on the west coast of Sweden. We worked there for four years and came back to the States for a two year period and then took another family along with us and were back in the work in Gothenburg for three more years. So it has been a total of ten years on the field there in the efforts of starting the work in Scandinavia--Sweden, Norway and Denmark--all were started at approximately the same time in the spring of 1957. Then the work was started in Finland a short time later. These are the four areas in Scandinavia that have been started to date. The congregations in all of the ten or eleven places where we have worked have been very small. The response has been slow. It is an area of the world where there is a great deal of materialism and a high standard of living and where the state church situation has not contributed a whole lot to the spiritual interest or real religious commitment. The state religion is Lutheran as it is in all of northern Europe. It is a place where the start and progress of the work are very slow. It is a place also where the people are extremely capable and where we feel there is good hope of a good work in the future, where we feel there are some good beginnings made even now.

Hacker: You mentioned that the people are Lutheran and have a high standard of living. Could you give us a little more information about the religious, cultural and economic background of these people as it reflects with the challenges that you had to face in beginning your work and in carrying it on?

Greer: The Lutheran Church, of course, is the dominant church in so far as church membership is concerned with some 92 or 93% of the population belonging to it. The most of them do not participate in it, though, other than in possibly attending Easter, Christmas and in having their marriages and funerals performed by state church priests almost without exception and having their children christened and confirmed in this state religion. The state religion also has an influence in the teaching of religious classes in the public schools but in a lot of cases this influence is negative rather than positive and sometimes it is outright

atheistic teaching. This is carried on by some who are nominally members of the state church but who are opposed to any real religious thought or teaching and use the opportunity to work against it instead. The religious history of Sweden and all of Scandinavia, of course, is like much of northern Europe. They were early swept along in the reformation movement, partly on a political basis rather than a strictly religious basis. The state churches there did exercise a very tight control for a long period of time. Then, of course, some reactions set in. Because of the coldness and the formality of the state church and the lack of depth for the most part, a lot of the people have turned to the opposite extreme in Pentacostalism. This has been a really dominant factor in so far as the small religious minority is concerned in the countries there. The challenge to us mainly is one of finding those people who can be reached with the teaching of the gospel who are definitely in the minority but reaching them with the gospel and accomplishing what it can accomplish then with those who are still open to listening to its teachings. It is a challenge at times to present a Christian evidences. It is a challenge also along with this though to present some real solid Biblical teaching which a lot of them have never really heard. A lot of them know a lot about the Bible, but they do not really know the Bible and its teachings at all.

Hacker: What method did you use to establish the work there?

Greer: A lot of our methods had to do with using printed work. We used a variety of methods, but the things that we found to be most successful in reaching the people and in really making contact with some of them seemed to be the use of the printed word in one way or another. Newspaper advertising has been far more effective there than it has been in the United States because the people read much more thoroughly the newspaper than they do here, including all advertisements and want ads and everything imaginable. The use of tracts and correspondence courses has seemed to be effective as an instrument for making contact with the people. It still has its limitations there as it does every where else in teaching all that needs to be taught. The people are not only highly literate and very interested in readings, but they are also in a large measure rather shy. They are known as being reserved and part of this is a shyness on their part in not knowing how to make personal contact and a fear of those who are aggressive in personal contact. A lot of times the only way that we can really establish a firm contact with somebody is to get into his hands something that he can read and something that he becomes involved with, interested in, and something that builds a bridge where he is ready to accept us in personal contact.

Hacker: If a young person were planning to go to northern Europe, what would be the first few things that they would expect to encounter in making their adjustments?

Greer: I think there would be an adjustment on the part of a lot of Americans, to start out with, to the fact that there is an area of the world where the standards of civilization or the things that we normally look to as identifying as civilized people have at least equaled and in some places surpassed our own, that you are dealing with a people that are not in any cultural or educational sense inferior to us, but, on the other hand, in some areas, at least, have made advances perhaps even beyond what we have. I think this would be one major adjustment that a lot of American young people would need to make very rapidly. At the same time, you go into a civilization that our society is perhaps approaching now but is gone far beyond what ours has in secularization and where the fact that you know something about the Bible is not a passport to respect among people. In fact, it may be the opposite. They kind of look down their nose at you and think, "Well, does he really

still believe in that kind of stuff?" These are some of the adjustments that I think would need to be counted on as a very rapid part of beginning to understand what you are facing. Of course, each country would have its own particular cultural habits and customs that would have to be adjusted to and the matter of communicating with each one would be a different matter in each country if not in each locality. The learning of their background, of their language, of their customs and so forth.

Hacker: About how long should a person expect to live in one of these Scandinavian countries before he could effectively communicate with the people in their language?

Greer: The definition of effective communication is a very difficult one to know exactly what you are talking about. I would say at least a year or two years would be required before he could really be very effective with them, possibly a little bit longer time than that within one locality to be extremely effective because it is not only a matter of learning to communicate language-wise and learning to understand something of their customs, but, because of the shyness and the formality and the reserve of the people, there is a longer time needed to build bridges of friendship with them.

Hacker: Could you tell us in this context some of the methods that you used which proved to be unsuccessful and then how of this experience, methods which you used in addition to the printed page which were successful. I would also like for you to elaborate, if you will, on some of the problems you may have encountered in developing these methods.

Greer: One thing that we tried in Gothenburg in our local work there, which we didn't have any success with at all, was going out and knocking doors in order to make contact just in the normal frame of reference of our day to day work. We have tried it in inviting people to a series of meetings or to a campaign that we had going on or something like that and have found a fair response to this. I felt like it was helpful, but insofar as trying to make an initial contact with somebody without the help of a meeting that you could invite them to, trying to start studies in their home and so forth. We worked for several months at one time in trying to do this and didn't get one single worthwhile contact out of it. At about that time, we were in contact with a couple of police officers with regard to a person that we were helping there. One of these got quite interested in what we were doing. He asked some about our methods and in talking about the door to door work he said that he and his wife and a number of their friends had just made it a rule that any time somebody came to their door trying to interest them in something that they automatically set up a barrier and would not have anything to do with them. I think this is quite characteristic. Again, going back to the shyness that I mentioned before, I think that really in a lot of cases we make it more difficult to approach them by trying to crash the barrier in this way in so far as a lot of these people are concerned than if we tried to use something like the printed page and come about in this way. I don't know just what to mention as far as particular problems that we have run into. It is a problem to make enough personal contacts and it is a problem once you have made and converted the people, it is a problem to help them to find a way to go ahead and make contact with other people because of this pattern, this formal pattern of doing everything and the immense shyness about getting close to anyone else personally. This is one of our areas where we need a lot more study and a lot more effort to try to find out how to communicate in their culture and with the background and how to keep this communication spreading. So

far, I can't really say that we have had very tremendous successes.

Hacker: What kind of training do you think a person that is planning to go to this area of the world should have in terms of courses that might be taken in college that would help prepare them to do this work?

Greer: Of course, a tremendous amount of solid Biblical background is needed anywhere, but in addition to this and also possibly something that is needed anywhere, I think there is a great need for teaching a cultural sensitivity, for preparing people for running into things that are much different from our way of life. Maybe to evaluate them a lot more objectively than what we have in most of the instances that I know of in the past and what I have a lot of the time. An appreciation of the European culture would be, of course, a great advantage to a person that is going any where in Europe and focusing in on the particular area where they might be going if they know far enough ahead of time exactly where their interests are going to lie. Learn a lot about the history and the background of these people. What has made them like they are and in so far as possible what they actually are now. The one book that I know of that gives the best insight into Scandinavians as a whole and into these particular people is a book entitled, The Scandinavians, by Donald Connery. It is something that I think would be a very helpful thing. It is the best that I know of with regard to Scandinavia, giving something of an understanding of what the people are like that you are going to be dealing with.

Hacker: Our young people who are preparing to go to the field have had little if any experience in gaining support for their desires. Would you offer any suggestions on how one may go about gaining his support and what were some of the things that you experienced in this area?

Greer: We've experienced a lot of things like this that a lot of other missionaries have experienced. Just the difficulty in finding enough people who are that interested in mission work to start out with and then in addition to that when we are going into an area of the world where the progress is slow, where the immediate results are not impressive, there are a lot of people who are looking for those immediate results and this becomes a difficulty. We have had to re-raise support a number of times because of a lack of patience that individual Christians and congregations had with the work there and the feeling, in some cases even, that it ought to be going at about the same rate that it seemingly is going at the congregations at home without any understanding of the differences in background and the difference in history, and so forth, and in a lot of cases without much understanding of what really is happening here at home. I don't know the answers to all the problems in connection with this. I do think that along with the normal efforts to find support among congregations that we need to impress on some of our young people that they need to look for opportunities to even go and work to support themselves, to do what they can for the church, not as one who is sent over there and paid to do a job, but someone who looks for an opportunity to work there and to give everything that he can to the support of the effort there with his presence, his activity, as well as his funds, and so forth, while he is there. I think we need a lot more emphasis on this. I think also it is much easier a lot of times for some of our young people before they are married and have families to raise the smaller amount of support that is needed to go over and to at least spend a year to two years in one of these works getting some personal acquaintance with it and some personal experience with it and at the same time contributing what help they can to those who may be already in these fields with families on a more permanent

basis. We are trying to encourage as much as possible of this type of effort. It is easier to get the support. It costs less. It gives an opportunity to increase the effectiveness of the few missionaries that we do have there in a significant way. It gives the young person himself an opportunity to go for a shorter period of time and then to make his decision on the basis of a lot more knowledge than what he could possibly have coming from over here. It will cause some to decide not to go into it on a more permanent basis in some cases where they should not. I think this is an advantage as well as the greater commitment that will come on the part of some of them that find their place in God's kingdom through this experience.

Hacker: You mentioned the importance of going with a vocation. What do you feel from your experience about the several approaches to mission work such as groups going out to one place? What has been your experience with this type of approach?

Greer: I think it is a thing that is needed. I think that in so far as I have been able to see in most cases that I have known anything about them the major problem has been with workers getting along with each other. I think there needs to be a more honest appraisal of our human limitations and shortcomings and difficulties when we go into something like this and a greater training and group sensitivity and group activity than what has normally preceded such efforts in order for it to really have an opportunity to succeed at all. The idealistic attitude that just because a person is going into mission work, he is going to be the kind of person that can give us anything and everything and that can get along with anybody under any situation is a thing that leads to a lot of frustrations that are unnecessary. This has been an attitude that has characterized both people who have been involved in groups like this and people who have been supporting them. If there ever are any personality problems that develop, then in a lot of cases the attitude is to just throw up the hands and say, "Well, this really is something that never should have occurred." Yet it is something that is going to occur. They are human beings. They are committed to something but they are still human beings and they need to recognize it. We need to recognize our own weaknesses and ask God for strength and look for the opportunities to overcome these difficulties but recognize that they are there, When we try to just shut our eyes to the fact that they are there, then the difficulties become that much greater.

Hacker: What is your experience and your attitude about the training of converts and supporting national preachers with American money?

Greer: I think there is a need for a lot more training of converts than has occurred as yet. I think it needs to be on a broader basis. I think this needs to be recognized and to a large extent is beginning to be recognized in a lot of places with reference to our local congregational activities within the States as well as within mission work. We need to recognize more of the responsibility of every Christian to be a part of the total work that we are doing rather than setting up one or two people within a congregation and saying that they are doing the work of the church. I think the same thing is needed on the mission field. We need to convince every convert that it is his responsibility to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ in whatever situation he is in, whether it is on a day to day work basis with other companions, others in his family, his relatives, his friends, whether it may be that it is not just a job of one person and we don't need to train just one person for a particular job but that we need to have a total commitment of every individual member of the congregation. We need to be working for this. This is the idea and, of course, we are going to fall short of it, but this is what we need to be reaching for. As far as the support of people there for full time

service, I think it is a matter of each individual situation that has to be judged so. I think in a lot of cases we have not been willing, and again I say "we" with a personal point of view as well as looking at the work of the church as a whole. We have not been willing in a lot of cases to look at the difficulties that it brings. We thought that it was all advantages and no disadvantages. I think we need to open our eyes to the disadvantages that can come and we need to be sure that our support of the person is not an attempt to buy him and to control him but that if we do provide support for him that we are supporting him with a viewpoint to making it more possible for him to devote his time to the activities there but that we are still appealing to him and training him and teaching him not only an employer-employee basis and not only on a policy of the fellow that pays the piper, calls the tune, but on a basis of mutual respect and again appealing to him simply on the basis of what the Bible teaches. This, of course, is one of the difficulties in supporting anyone.

Hacker: A number of people have indicated to us that the use of the printed page and the Bible correspondence course are effective. How do you evaluate the present materials that we have and how do you feel that they may be improved?

Greer: In the Scandinavian countries, of course, each country has its own language. They are similar enough that you can converse with one another, that you can use some materials on a limited basis from another place in each of the countries. On the whole, we have several good correspondence courses that are available. There can be a lot of improvements made in this area as well in all of our printed work, of course. I think that we do have a good start in this direction in the development of courses that are needed within most of these countries. I think that it, like again our situation here in the States, needs to be something that we are continuously working on. We will never reach a point when we can just say, "Well, that's good from here out" because people change, the situation changes, the attitudes change, current events at one time are history at another time, and the approach to people that is good in this particular period of time may not be at all good in another time. I think this is something that we will always need to continue working on.

Hacker: We appreciate your willingness to stop by today and talk with us. Do you have any suggestions that you might offer that would help us improve our work here in the motivation and training of young people to go to the field?

Greer: The only thing that I think of is that I do believe that we need to emphasize for all of our young people that we do have a common task, that is something that every one of us can share in in one way or another. I don't think that we need to glorify the person who goes overseas. I don't think that he necessarily is serving more effectively in the kingdom and the cause of Christ than the one who finds an effective place here. I do think that we need a larger portion of our personnel and of our resources and our available funds, and so forth, channeled toward the helping of other people than what we have put into it so far. I think that we need, again, all the way through it, to recognize that it is a matter of every individual trying as honestly as he can to look at the opportunities that God has given him and to look at the ability that he has and trying to find a way to fit these into the over-all task that faces the church in our generation. In order to contribute most effectively to the carrying of the gospel to every place and to every person.

Hacker: Again, let me thank you for coming by on this 29th of September 1970. I want to wish you Godspeed in your work at Abilene Christian College and in the efforts to encourage people to preach the gospel in all the world.