
Living History of Missions

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Interview of Bill McDonough

Bill McDonough

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LIVING HISTORY OF MISSIONS

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This is Winfred Wright and I am interviewing Bill McDonough who is a missionary in Bremen, Germany. He and his wife, Barbara, are preparing to return to Bremen. We are happy to have you on our campus today, Bill, to talk with us and visit with us concerning your work there. We appreciate you taking a few minutes now to answer some questions for us concerning your work in Germany. I'll ask you first to give us a brief historical outline of the work in Bremen and your participation in the work up to the present.

McDonough: After spending three years with an American church in Wiesbaden, during which time we studied the language, we moved to Bremen in July, 1968. The first converts were made in about the middle of 1969. There are presently seven adult German members that meet and worship with us in Bremen. We also had a part in starting a work along with three other American workers in Quakenbruck which is about 60 miles west of us. We work with these two works. The history of the work is perhaps not easy for us to explain briefly for you but we began with (If I get ahead of you just tell me) an information center in the downtown area in which we tried to make contacts with the people and introduce them to the church. It is a city of 650,000 people where to our knowledge there were no New Testament Christians at the time that we went. This proved to be very effective. It was open about a year and a half. But we got to the place, because of the shortage of personnel, that we had to close it in order to try to follow up with the contacts which we had already made. However, through this we still, through the contacts that were made through this mission center and reading room, we still have our greatest potential, at least the number of contacts that were made through this medium. They seem to be some of our better contacts and from these people we have contacted in the downtown center we continue to have our best studies and best prospects, we believe.

Wright: Tell us something about the religious background of the people with whom you work. I believe your work is principally in northern Germany.

McDonough: That is correct. In the North, northern Germany, is traditionally Lutheran and the South in return is traditionally Catholic. There where we live and work, the city's Chamber of Commerce in their propaganda material says we are 89% Lutheran and 10% Catholic. That means one per cent for the rest of us.

Wright: What is the cultural and economic background of the people? What are some of the general characteristics of this area?

McDonough: Northern Germany is traditionally a shipping and trade section of the country. The larger sea ports, in fact the only sea ports, are in the North because we are bordered by Holland, Belgium, and France in the South. And so our main industry in the North is dependent on the shipping. We have all sorts of raw materials that are processed such as iron ore. We have steel mills in Bremen, but it comes in on our ships. We have coffee industry there because of the raw coffee shipping there. Most everything industrially is centered around the port itself. Also the rural areas of northern Germany are traditionally dairy farming and so this is a major industry also.

Wright: I am sure that in working both in the southern part of Germany and now in the northern part you have encountered several challenges. What are some of the more serious challenges that you have had to overcome in order to carry on an effective work?

McDonough: We believe probably the greatest personal challenge we've had is the language and it continues to be. No doubt, it will continue to be because we learn to not only to communicate but to understand the communication, or we'll not be effective in the work. I think probably this is the major challenge to us at least in the work--being able not only to speak the language but to understand the deeper meaning behind the language and to communicate to the people through the language and through their understanding of it. The other personal challenges which we might mention might be adjustments to the culture which are not as major in Germany as they are in some other parts of the world. In western Germany, living there is must like living here with a few adjustments. To learn to appreciate the people for what they are and not to want to have them be what you are is no doubt sometimes a personal challenge also.

Wright: You have already told us a little bit about the method you used in the beginning of the work in Bremen. What methods are you using now?

McDonough: We, of course, are using a number of varied methods; however, the things which seem to be the most productive at present are the use of Direct Mail, a magazine that is presently being published and edited in Vienna which we can use and are using, and also a new Bible correspondence course which has been used in France for several years has proven to be very effective. These two things along with, of course, personal follow up are our main thrusts and our main attempts at using different methods in trying to reach people and convert them.

Wright: What methods have you tried and abandoned because you found them to be unusable in the work there?

McDonough: Numerous. We have tried, for example, a 21-lesson Bible correspondence course which we found to be very impractical due to a number of things. The people didn't have enough interest or Bible knowledge; it was too difficult for them. So the course that I mentioned earlier is a 2-lesson course and those who are interested and would like to continue with something more advanced, we offer them this course. We found extensive Bible study through Bible correspondence course very impractical as a general rule, some do have a background and can complete it, but as a general rule it seemed to be rather impractical. Also, we realized that having meetings, we realized that maybe before we tried it, but we tried it anyhow, having evangelistic meetings and that alone without a lot of personal invitations prior to the meeting was not effective; people did not come. So although we have not abandoned public evangelistic meetings, we realize that we must prepare for these meeting through personal invitations primarily and through making a real effort to invite people who are already interested to come to these meetings if they are to be productive. Really, this is about all. We haven't been very pioneering in our methods, we have tried to use methods that have already proven to be effective so consequently I can't tell you too many that don't work.

Wright: I think you've been working alone or with just one or two helpers most of the time that you've been in Bremen. Have you been involved in any special approach to mission work such as group work approach or anything else of special significance?

McDonough: Yes and no. We've tried to be involved in a group work, but we can't seem to keep workers. At one time there were three of us working together for about two years, and we are very much impressed with the group mission idea with our limited experience of it, providing that those in the group have a preconceived idea or pre-arranged concept as to how they are going to work and what the job is that each individual is going to be doing. I believe personally that group efforts can be very productive, much more productive than working alone provided these people have worked out the problems of working together and getting along and provided that everyone understands what everyone else's job is and that they don't get in each other's way. We are now trying to recruit some more people to come and work with us in a group effort. I am very much impressed with it and with the limited experience I've had; however, there are a lot of problems in working with groups and these things need to be worked out. There needs to be rules, cut and dry, and decisions made as to what work is mine, and what is yours, how we are going to reach decisions and what have you before the group begins to work together. Individuals working along--some are very productive. The main obstacle is there is just not enough time to get done all that needs to be done, especially in a new work as we are working in where there aren't a considerable number of faithful Christians who are able to be involved in the work themselves.

Wright: What are you doing about training your converts to do much of this work themselves?

McDonough: What are we doing? We are trying to get them to do it. No, each individual is a different individual and must be approached differently; we work under the concept that we want to turn over the work of the local congregation and the work of the local church to the native people as rapidly as we can in order that we can go to a new place where there is no church and try to establish another church. As an example, we have four men in the congregation where we are. Two of them are elderly men, one of them does not seem to have or has not demonstrated much ability to be able to use in the work; however one of the men who is younger, about 37 or 38, is a salesman. He is very capable and though rather reluctant in the beginning, is preaching now and to help him realize the need of doing personal work we take him visiting with us and try to show through our own demonstration in a practical way the value of trying to talk to others personally. I believe that taking people with you whether it be taking people with you to the office and showing them how you run the Bible correspondence course or whether it is taking them with you on a cottage meeting and letting them see first hand how you teach others that perhaps this is one of the best ways to encourage them to do it, once they see that it is productive and that they can do it. This is the approach that we have tried to use.

Wright: So you are using a more of an apprentice type training program rather than having an organized training school, as such. I'm not sure that you have any preachers in the northern Germany, native German preachers, but would you express your feelings about supporting national preachers with American money?

McDonough: Of course, I think every situation must be evaluated as the situation that it is and perhaps some situations show the need and perhaps native workers should be supported, but in our own limited experience, I feel very strongly that especially in the beginning of a work it is not a wise decision to make. I feel

strongly enough about it that we have a young man who is coming to work with us. I think he would come to work with us for certain if we would raise him \$300 or \$400 a month support, but we feel that if he will come and get a job and work and preach and work with the church that he not only will be respected by the local congregation but the community much more. He will also be eliminating some problems for him because we have known several situations where the national men have been supported for a number of years by churches back here in America. They have felt like they wanted to get into some other work or for one reason or another. They felt like the work with the national should be self-supporting so they cut off his support and because he had worked as a preacher supported by American funds for a number of years, he could no longer could go back into his occupation. He was too far behind. He had been out of it for 15 or 20 years and this creates a lot of personal hardships on the national workers themselves and creates many times problems in the churches. So basically, I'm opposed to it and feel like I would not raise any support for a national man although there might be an exception that I would sometime, but as a general rule I feel like it is a big mistake.

Wright: You talked about your challenges a little while ago and you mentioned your greatest challenge was learning the language. What hints or suggestions would you make relative to language training? How important is it? Should one try to get language training before he goes to the field? What stress do you place on language training in the overall preparation of the work for a missionary? That is a lot of questions in one but that leaves you some freedom to talk.

McDonough: I believe this is probably the major qualification is the ability to communicate, and I'm not a linguist so I can't speak very authoritatively, but I think it is very important that we not only study the language before we go, especially if we are in an academic situation here in America now, but that we get some experience before we make a final decision to go to a particular area that we go visit that area once or twice and try our ability of communicating with the people to understand the problems of communication which I mentioned a while ago and which you understand better than I. They are much more deeply rooted--these problems of communication--than just the ability to memorize words and grammatical phrases and say them. This is the whole thing as I understand it. Besides, what we are teaching, the gospel of Christ and the hope of the world, unless we can communicate this to the people in a way that they will be able to understand it in their culture, we are not doing the job even though we may be desparately trying. This has been demonstrated very well through our means of Direct Mail, which I mentioned a while ago. For a number of years we have attempted numerous methods and have tried to use lots of different methods in Germany that were to a greater degree not very productive. Now we have learned to communicate with the people in a way that they will listen. This problem of communication is not only language but also the medium and because we are using a medium that they will listen to, they'll read and we are using language that also will listen to. We are able to communicate much better than we have in the past. So I would suggest that if you are in an academic situation now that you especially get all the language you can possibly can and then that you get some direct exposure of the use of this language before you make a final decision to go.

Wright: I remember that during your first years in Germany you were working with an American military congregation while studying the German language. Do you feel this had some very definite advantages for you in learning the language. What would you suggest in view of this experience?

McDonough: I think this was the right experience for us. This let us view the thing as an outsider. We got to look at the German work and what was going on without being directly involved and having the pressures on us of producing. We got to see the German people and become very well acquainted with them from sort of a distance and weren't faced with the problems of dealing with the problems of communicating with the people, at the same time we were studying the language and trying to understand the people, but in a rather relaxed atmosphere which I think was a distinct advantage for us. I would encourage anyone who could have an opportunity to have such an experience either as we did as working with an English-speaking church on European soil or perhaps being employed in an area where they could speak the language such as some of our eastern cities where they could have the opportunity to be exposed to a different culture such as Puerto Ricans in New York or Polish people in Detroit. I think the great opportunity here is the advantage that you are not under pressure to produce and yet you can enjoy the study and also get acquainted with people in a rather relaxed atmosphere. This was a great advantage to us I feel.

Wright: Do you think it might be a good idea for churches to support a missionary in the early months with the idea that language training can be a little bit more relaxed rather than putting a lot of pressure on him to produce during these early months of his work?

McDonough: Very definitely. I think an agreement could be made with a sponsoring church that you perhaps go and spend the first several months in doing nothing, that they don't expect you to do anything except study the language and get acquainted with the people. This would be a distinct advantage to you and to the work in the long run in the months ahead.

Wright: We'll change the topic a little bit here. You were telling something about your effort to raise some funds for Direct Mail evangelism. What is your greatest problem in gaining support for the work in Germany?

McDonough: I think, it is hard question to answer. I think, I don't understand the greatest problems. I feel like the greatest problem again here in finding funds is perhaps communicating--I think most problems are communication problems--what we intend to do, what we are trying to do, how we are going to go about it, and being able to communicate this mission, this message without feeling like you personally, as the missionary are in competition with a number of other mission fields. Sometimes this becomes a competitive process. And it shouldn't be and when you begin to compete, it generally hurts you and helps the man that you competing with. If we could go to churches to instill the idea that we are trying our very best to do what we can to preach the gospel to every creature in the area where we are and then to communicate to them a program that we think will work, that we are going to try to make work. We can't make a lot of promises that we can't keep, but we can help them have the concept of preaching the gospel to every creature and not necessary baptizing every creature. We need to teach them that we are going to teach and we are going to hope that some will respond. If we can overcome these difficulties--feeling like we are competing with others--I think it will help us a great deal in raising support. If we will go and sincerely--not make promises--outline what we want to do and then just be ourselves and promise churches and promise ourselves that we will do our utmost to do the Lord's will that brethren will see that we are sincere and will help us and rise to the need.

where there has been no church and where there is not going to be any church unless some of them go. And give them a more pioneering spirit. I realize this isn't going to be an easy process.

Wright: We will close out our interview by looking to the future a little bit. Simply, summarize your feelings about the future of your work in Bremen?

McDonough: I think the future of the work in Bremen and northern Germany--we consider northern Germany our field not just Bremen--is very bright. I say that because of the methods that I mentioned a while ago, particularly the new Bible correspondence course and the Direct Mail efforts that are being made. I believe that if we continue and keep our goals constantly in mind and not get side-tacked, that the church in northern Germany is going to grow and the number of congregations is going to multiply within the next seven to ten years. We believe that our concept may have a lot to do with this. We are going to send this Direct Mail magazine to every person, or we are attempting to get the funds for that. To every person or every family in the northern Germany area would be some 17 million in the northern section where very little work has been done. Then when we do this we have the names addresses already of people who are interested, how interested we never know until we talk to them but they show some interest in religious things, which sets our work ahead by years because usually you spend years trying to find those who are interested and then longer times trying to study with them and convert them and then teach. So by letting this Direct Mail magazine do this big job for us, to some degree at least, we are speeding things up by several years. Then we have changed our concept somewhat and we don't intend to go into rent buildings and begin to have meetings but go to individuals who are already reading this magazine whom we have already contacted and study with them and try to convert and encourage them to set up churches and begin meeting in their homes. We in turn plan to stay in northern Germany for several years and will visit with these churches and will study with them to try to help them and bring them along and will be in the area if they need to call on us or if they think they want us to come. If they have problems and so on and by this we are going to be preaching the gospel to a lot more people than we have in the past. I think this has been part of our problem. We have been dealing with too few people, and thus we are converting only a few. The Lord said, "If you sow sparingly, you are going to reap sparingly, but if you sow bountifully, you are going to reap bountifully." So we are trying to begin to sow very bountifully wherever we may and we believe within a few years we will be reaping bountifully.

Wright: We appreciate your coming by to visit with us, Bill, and we appreciate this optimistic spirit with which you are approaching your work. Certainly our prayer is that you will reap the harvest. This has been Winfred Wright interviewing Bill McDonough, March 2, 1972.

Wright: Have you had any problems in keeping support after you at one time gained it?

McDonough: Not a great deal. We did lose our support on one occasion but not due to anything that we did or any problems in our work but rather the church lost their ability to support us due to some local congregation problems. I believe, however, that we haven't had any problems because we have made a real effort to communicate with those who are supporting us through reports and pictures. The responsibility lies on us for this and this is the most beneficial way to assure that brethren will keep on supporting you. If they know that you are busy and that you are trying and are seeing results of your attempts then generally most of them will stick with you.

Wright: Would you list for us specifically some of these ways you have kept in contact with your home churches. You mentioned reports and pictures, would you enlarge on this just a little bit--how you have communicated with your congregation, the frequency and the method?

McDonough: We have used numerous methods. Basically, we send out a type-written mimeographed sort of report every month to all people who are interested and supporting our work and every quarter we print a two page printed report with pictures of some of the work and activities that are going on and mail this in bundles to the congregations. Also to our sponsoring church we send something if anything special happens, if someone is baptized or if we have a special evangelistic effort. We try to make pictures and send to the sponsoring church real regularly. As often as anything happens. Sometimes I will send something 3 or 4 times a month. Other times I won't send anything but once a month. We keep them informed and the old saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words" is very true. I suggest that you send pictures not just a single-spaced typewritten report which is hard to read and uninteresting. Also we have used tapes effectively with different groups that have supported us. We sent a tape of the services, for example, on one occasion. We sent a tape of children singing in Bible classes. We talked about the city. We took a tape recorder, a cassette, and went to the harbor and listened to the fog horns on the ships and talked to some of the people on the street--even though it was in German they could hear this and then explained what we were doing. I think this has had a real effect on people continuing their support.

Wright: I am sure this is true. I know that your sponsoring church in Little Rock fairly frequently prints these pictures that you send to them in their weekly bulletin which helps inform the whole congregation of your work there. As you know, Bill, we are very much interested here at Harding in helping to train and motivate in the area of mission work. You know something of our program and what we are doing now. What suggestions would you make that we could implement to improve our work along this line?

McDonough: I am not an educator. I don't have many suggestions along this line. I would like to say this and only this about that. I never knew Brother J.W. Armstrong but many workers who are in Europe and who were in Europe did know him and because of this one man they were there. I don't know what he had or how he went about it but if somehow some of us and some of you here could find what Brother Armstrong had to encourage people to go, I think this would be a great asset to your program and to us. I feel like one of the things that our mission departments are not doing- and I don't know if it is their fault or not- but one thing I see that I don't think we are doing is challenging young people to go to preach where the gospel has never been preached. And to move to areas where there is no church;