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Interview of Sonny Guild

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Sonny Guild from Western Kenya, Africa, was interviewed by Don Shackelford.

Shackelford: We are very happy to have Sonny Guild visiting on our campus, and we are glad to have him tell us about the mission work that he has been engaged in in Kenya along with others. Sonny, to begin with, just give us a brief historical outline of the work from beginning to date.

Guild: The work in Kenya began in 1965, with the first workers being Van Tate and Ted Ogle who went to Nairobi. The work progressed there and continued there. Primarily, the work was in Nairobi until 1969 when Hilton Merritt went to Kenya, and the work began in Western Kenya, where I am working. Now there are four families living in Nairobi and three of us families living and working in Western Kenya.

Shackelford: Tell us something about the religious background of the people with whom you work.

Guild: We are working with the Abaluhya tribe living just north of Lake Victoria and going to the border of Uganda. This part of the country has been highly churched. The major missions that have been there for many years are the Anglicans, Quakers, Church of God, Pentecostal group, and the Catholics. Many of these have been there for 40-50 years. So the big majority of these people are, in the broad sense of the term, Christian. They consider themselves some type of Christian, although there is still animism there and some pagan type worship. But the majority of them call themselves some form of Christian.

Shackelford: How pronounced would you say that animism is in the area where you work?

Guild: In our area it isn't as dominant as in other areas. I have never seen any real figures as to the percentage of people that profess some type of Christianity, but I would guess that it would be upward to maybe 80 something per cent.

Shackelford: Tell us something of the culture and economic background of the people of Kenya in general, then of the people where you are working.

Guild: Kenya is really a very progressive nation for a developing nation. She has been independent since 1963 and she, Uganda, and Tanzania formed the Eastern African community. Of these countries, Kenya is by far the most progressive. Tanzania is completely socialistic, but Kenya is on a free enterprise system and because of this, she has profited much more. People have come in with foreign investments and have really built up the country. This has caused problems because any developing country wants to Africanize. This has caused problems for the leaders trying to Africanize, and they can't do it because they don't have capable men to take over big industry and such. But it has developed the country much more industrially than the other countries. Out where we live, it is an agricultural society. The people are subsistent farmers. According to African standards, the people in Western Kenya have a very good life. The rainfall is pretty constant and we don't have any real distinct crises for long periods of time. They have a very good life agriculturally.

Shackelford: In the pictures you have shown, you have indicated that most of them do have plots of ground. All of them, I would take it, at least have the possibility. Would you amplify on that a little bit?

Guild: O.K. Many of these are pieces of ground that have been in the family for many years, but there is quite a bit of interest on the part of the Africans to buy new ground and to develop it agriculturally. Western Kenya, where we are working, has the densest population in Kenya. I don't know the exact figure, but it is over a 100 per square mile. South of us, getting closer to Lake Victoria, the plots of ground are much smaller, ranging maybe a half acre or acre to a family. Then as you go north where land is more available, they become larger, even up to 40-50 acres.

Shackelford: Is the land around Victoria more fertile, or is there some other reason for their being smaller?

Guild: I think maybe the commercial enterprise that is centered around the lake and transportation through has probably led to more living there.

Shackelford: How many distinct geographical districts are there in Kenya? You have mentioned the Western. I take it that there are at least Western and Eastern, or are there others?

Guild: Let's see if I can remember. There are about 10, but I would have to see a map. If I had a map, I could tell you.

Shackelford: Do these follow cultural boundaries as well?

Guild: Yes, these are political boundaries, but they are really drawn on tribal boundaries as well. We live in the Western province, and this province is completely Abaluhya.

Shackelford: Politically speaking, what is the largest tribe or the most influential one?

Guild: It is Kikuya, and because of this, most of your politicians and the president is Kikuyan.

Shackelford: What part of the country are they in?

Guild: They are around the parts surrounding Nairobi, the capital, the central part of the country.

Shackelford: What would you consider, Sonny, to be some of the serious challenges that you had to overcome as missionaries in Kenya, generally? I take it that we have works only in two sections. Is this correct? Speaking from your own experience first, and then also perhaps something about the challenges in both areas -- Nairobi and the Western section.

Guild: Of course, there is the challenge of trying to work within a very strange culture. This, of course, affects all the missionaries, even in other countries beside Kenya. I think one of the greatest things that missionaries in any African society have to cope with is the value of time. They just do not value time. We work in schedules, and they do not. You've got to adjust to this and learn to work like they do, otherwise you become very frustrated.

I think one of the problems that has affected our work in Western Kenya is that we do have African independent churches. They are trying to have an African identity to their religion - to their Christianity. So it is really an advantageous situation to plea from New Testament Christianity to unity. But I think that many times, the idea of unity they have, even though they are independent, is a unity of spirit.

Anyone who has broken away that is part of an African identity and Christianity, is a unit. And so we have problems getting across to them that 'yes, unity of spirit is important, but the unity based upon New Testament teaching is also important.'

Nairobi has any of the problems that an urban society would have. It is a very modern city, very large and, of course, you have problems in dealing with many tribal groups within the city. These customs often conflict, and there is tribal strife in the city. It is just concentrated there because they are so close together.

Shackelford: In your speaking, you have mentioned Europeans and Africans. I take it that Europeans would include anyone who is not black. Is this correct?

Guild: Anyone who is not black or Asian.

Shackelford: Do they consider Asians as Europeans as well?

Guild: No, I think they consider them a group by themselves. You probably have the four groups: Africans, Orientals, Asians, and Europeans.

Shackelford: Regardless of where you are from, you are European?

Guild: Yes, a European is roughly anyone who is white or who is from Europe or an American nation.

Shackelford: Do you find problems connected with this - you being European working in a black nation?

Guild: Not too much. Kenya has always had a very open door and open mind, because she has realized the value of foreign investment in the country. And so she has been very open to Europeans and other races coming in and living there, although again, they are going back to the effort to Africanize. The pressure is put upon even the missions that have hospitals there to put in Africans in positions of importance, such as doctors and nurses, whenever they can. So there is a strong tendency toward this, which is natural for a developing country.

Shackelford: Has there been any Communist overtures in Kenya to the government?

Guild: Nothing to any great degree. Because Kenya is a developing country, the political structure is so new that the political party in power has really no concept of a loyal opposition. For example, we have the Republicans and Democrats - an opposition party to the party in power. And so really, to the party in power's eyes, any opposition is an opposition that is not loyal, that would overthrow things. The second predominant tribe did have a leader, (he is free now - he has been freed just since we've been in Kenya), who started an opposition party and it was thought to have Communist support in trying to overthrow the government, so the government outlawed the party.

Shackelford: Let's move into another area. I would like for you to talk for just awhile about the methods that are being used in Kenya. I know that you have some strong feeling in this which is probably related from your training that you had in preparing to go. Also give your own thoughts since you've been on the field. I would like for you to discuss this a moment.

Guild: O.K. First I'll deal with where we live, in Western Kenya. We really have two emphases in our effort in Western Kenya. Of course, the major one is our regular evangelistic work. We go out every week during the days teaching and preaching. During this time, several days a week, we usually spend the night out with the

people teaching them. In these teaching efforts we are studying with congregations that have been planted, and also in places where we are just making contact. These congregations have not crystallized yet.

And then also besides our regular evangelistic work, we have periodically what we call leadership training courses. This is where we invite the men from the congregations to come and study with us. But it is not limited to them; it is open to anyone who wants to come and study the Bible intensively for a week or two weeks. This is basically the two areas that we have involved in our approach in Western Kenya.

In Nairobi, there is, of course, an evangelistic effort within the city. One of the missionaries there is working more to the north and trying to get out into the reserves from Nairobi. But as well as having the evangelistic work with the churches, just this past year, a preachers' training school has been begun by Van Tate, the first missionary to Kenya. It is just a year old now. The first year it operated in English, now it is beginning this year to operate in Swahili. He and all the workers there are responsible for the school, but primarily he and his co-worker, Richard Chounin, are. But all of the workers in Nairobi help in the instruction. And so really we have these efforts going on.

Shackelford: All right. Now more specifically, on the matter of method, I noticed that you've stressed what in mission parlors is called the indigenous method. Is the same thing being done in Nairobi?

Guild: Yes, we have been very fortunate, you know, because of our loose structure within the churches of Christ based on Biblical principles. We can't control who comes in and who does not come in. We have been very fortunate in that all the people who have been working there had an agreement about this. I mean they have their own understanding about trying to start an indigenous work; not to bring in outside support to finance any work that is done there among the local people.

Shackelford: Yet I seem to detect in your speaking that there was some, shall we say, elasticity in this fact. For example, in giving some help on buildings if they had already indicated a beginning on their own. Is this correct?

Guild: This is right. We will not help them build buildings or support preachers. We don't want to support the work ourselves and make it rely on us. We do not want to squelch any ambitions that they have on their own, so we tell them that we will work with them and help them. We each, personally, in Western Kenya, have given donations to buildings and have volunteered physical labor whenever they work, but we do not carry the major burden. We let them take the lead in it. So far, it has worked out pretty well. The people have been very slow to believe us, and they will wait for a long time before they begin anything, thinking that we will come through finally. But when they begin, we are certainly willing to help them and work with them.

Shackelford: This is only on buildings? You provide no help whatsoever in minister salary?

Guild: Well, I can't say this completely. Up to this point, we have not supplied any financial help. However, there is a situation going on north of us in the newest church. Members of the church are giving some land for a preacher to come in to live with them and to farm. The land that they will give has not yet been farmed. So we have talked among ourselves (the workers in Western Kenya). We will give some aid to the man that goes out there for a year until he gets his land productive. Otherwise, he would not have a livelihood until the land is producing. You can be very rigid and say that I follow this practice completely, and you can overlook many

opportunities of helping and working with the people. We have not tried to isolate ourselves and get ourselves backed into a corner saying we only work this way. So we are going to give a bit of assistance here with the understanding that it is going to stop when the man makes the land productive. After a year then, this will stop.

Shackelford: I am interested in this, obviously, for my own background of experience or working in mission work. I am sure that the ones who use this material that you are giving will be interested in the matter of methods. Incidentally, although it is certainly not important for this interview or anything, I do agree with your approach as long as there is left in there provision for any local work. I don't think that we can just set up a rigid standard and say that everyone has to conform to this, because I think in different countries and even different parts of different countries, there are differences.

Guild: The economic situation would have a strong bearing on this.

Shackelford: We have already discussed some of the methods and you have indicated some. Would you like to indicate perhaps one or two that stand out, that have proven most useful?

Guild: Again I have only been there two years, and there hasn't been much change in the approach while I have been there. The men who were before me had tried certain things and they seemed to work pretty well, so we are continuing with this, although we are going to make some changes and try some new things later on. The thing we have felt the best about and had the most success with is the leadership training courses that we have had. It has given a time for instruction for subsistent farmers when their crops are growing and they don't have much work, so they can come in and study. Also it has given opportunity for men from these African independent churches to come in and study. Since they have divorced themselves from any missions, they have cut themselves off from any advanced training - any additional intensive type training. So it has really been an opportunity here to break in and have some contact with these groups.

Shackelford: Did those of you working together go to Kenya together? Had you gone as sort of a group, or had the two of you particularly gone?

Guild: Not really. Hilton is supported by the Brookside church as myself. He was going with two other families. Part of our training and their training was to take psychological examinations. On the basis of this and other things, frustrations within the group itself, Hilton was the only one that went from this group. Before he went he came to Abilene to investigate the possibility of any other couples going with him since the church had funds to send another family. So we contacted Brookside and thus went a year after Hilton had gone there. And then Gaston had worked in Nigeria in the Cameroons. On their way over Hilton stopped in the Cameroons and talked with Jenny and Gaston. They were wanting to get back into Nigeria, but at that time, they couldn't, and they didn't know what the possibilities were in the years to come. So they decided they had to make a decision. They decided to come to Kenya to work also.

Shackelford: It is fortunate, I think, that three of you failed together in this way.

Guild: Yes, very fortunate. We are very happy with our co-workers.

Shackelford: What ideas from mission work you had on your own in the past have you found to be unusable in Kenya, if any? Can you think of anything right off hand that would fit this category?

Guild: I can't think of anything specific since my work in Kenya is so new. I mean I've just been there two years. But I can say this about my own plans for mission work. I was planning to be a medical missionary and through most of my undergraduate work I was a pre-med major. In '63, at the beginning of my college work, I went to Tanzania for six months. I was a little slow in making the ultimate decision to change my emphasis completely to the religious side of the effort. But through my experience there, I think I came to the feeling that I didn't want to go into a medical practice because I wanted a work that would give me more opportunities to witness with the word, rather than through a ministry that would simply tie me down to practically just one thing, and that is doctoring.

Shackelford: It would be an indirect approach?

Guild: Yes.

Shackelford: You have mentioned training schools; the one in Nairobi and also these training programs that you are involved in. Is there a specific curriculum set up in the school in Nairobi, for example? Let's talk about that for a moment. Have they set up a curriculum? If so, what guidelines do you know that they are following?

Guild: I don't know that they have done any real work in setting up a permanent type curriculum. I know they were having troubles, with this next year coming, in finding Swahili materials to use. So they were quite limited as to what direction they could go because the materials are limited.

Shackelford: Are you aware of the work that Ralph D. Winter has done in theological education? There are several good books on which he has worked together with Don McGavern that we found helpful in Italy. These men who are trained in Nairobi; are they young men, or older men? Are they planning to be full time workers? What is the approach being used there?

Guild: During this past first year I would say that all of the men were young men. And this is primarily because the instruction is in English. The school year has just begun, so I don't know all the students. This year, since they have gone to Swahili, I know of one man who has come from Western Kenya. He does not speak English. He is one of the main leaders in one of the churches there who has gone in and is taking courses there now. Many of them, like this man, really work with the church, but also are farmers and support themselves this way. These men are helped while they are in school. They are given housing and an allotment to buy food. If they are married, they are to send part of this allotment back home. Then they are told that they will not be given help after they leave.

Shackelford: What language training have you received specifically, and what are the predominant languages in Kenya?

Guild: All of our missionaries have studied Swahili. This is a trade language that everyone who is involved in commerce knows, and so it is a very simple language structurally. The church missionary society has a language school in Nairobi that runs the year round, and they teach Swahili as well as several of the vernaculars. So all of our people in Kenya have gone to the language school for several months when they first come to Kenya and while they are adjusting. They study language totally, doing no other work. Maybe on Sundays they do some preaching. I did do some Swahili study in Tanzania in '63. I studied Swahili for a month after I got there and then chose to go into a vernacular of the Abaluhyan people. I studied it for three months in this language school. This was the first time Luo had ever been offered and has been offered since. I felt like this was a real opportunity to seize upon to study the vernacular

of the people that I am working with.

Shackelford: Is the Bible available in the vernacular that you worked in?

Guild: In Luo you have 19 dialects and in one of the dialects which I do not know, they have both the Old and New Testaments. In this language which is really a conglomerate of 4 dialects, they have a New Testament and Psalms. They have submitted the Old Testament to the Bible Society, but it will probably be about 5 years before it is out.

Shackelford: Who is responsible for translation work?

Guild: The Anglicans, primarily. In fact, I talked with the lady who did most of the translating for 20 years. Since I didn't have the Old Testament, she gave me several of her manuscripts of Old Testament books to help me.

Shackelford: One of the questions that we normally ask is about the greatest problem in gaining support. But I presume the support gained you and that you fell into a very happy situation.

Guild: I was very fortunate and very happy. My dad is a fund-raiser and I am not. Brookside supplies our salary. I did have to go out and look for work funds. Here again, I was very fortunate. Friends that I had known just volunteered help, and it has been very good. Most of the support for a work fund for myself comes from individuals, although there are three churches that are giving support.

Shackelford: I think that Brookside church in Tulsa is one of the outstanding churches in the planning of mission work. For its size, it is certainly doing a great deal. Tell us just a little bit about their philosophy of mission work.

Guild: Brookside has really had a kind of an evolving mission program. At the present time, they have four missionaries they are supporting; Earl Edwards, Clinton Brazle, (Earl in Italy, Clinton in Canada), and then Hilton Merritt and myself in Kenya, East Africa. The approach that they have used in their missionary work is that they bring each of their missionaries to live with the congregation and work with them for a year. This, I think, was the greatest year of my life as far as any service I have given. I had just come out of graduate school and it was a real time of growing and of spiritual strength for my wife and myself. It really gives a basis for first-hand knowledge of the congregation and the missionary. There is always a gap of communication of understanding when you are in a foreign country with the congregation that sends you. The gap is lessened the more acquainted you are with the strengths and weaknesses of both the congregation and the missionary. So they have added missionaries. I think maybe they did work with Clinton on his job partially, but now they have been fully involved in his work. Earl Edwards is probably the one they have been involved with fully for the greatest length of time. Then Hilton and I are the last missionaries they have taken.

Shackelford: In your reporting to them, do they make any specific requests on the type of reporting that you do monthly, or do they leave it up to you?

Guild: Not really. They leave us pretty free. Our effort in Kenya and also the Italian effort has a monthly bulletin that we do put out, but this isn't an obligation on us. It is primarily for informing those who are giving to our work fund. After each of our schools, Hilton and I just take it upon ourselves to evaluate the schools and send an evaluation to the elders. I try personally to send reports quarterly, of course, to anyone who helps us. I think we have been very fortunate in the communication we have gotten from the elders there. They, of course, have their own work

and problems with the local church, but in relation to other elderships that I know about, they are very good to communicate with us.

Shackelford: Is it correct that for each one of you on the field, there is a local man chosen; a deacon or someone in the congregation, who acts as sort of a treasurer and a liaison with the elders?

Guild: Yes, that is right. There is one for the Kenya effort, and one for the Italian effort, but I don't think there is one for the Canadian effort, because they do not have a work fund as such.

Shackelford: You are a graduate of Harding, aren't you?

Guild: Yes I am.

Shackelford: From what you have just said, I wasn't aware of your training or what you had intended to do. What do you think that we here at Harding can do to improve our program of work toward helping people who are going to be involved as full time workers either in the United States and especially in a mission field.

Guild: The church as a whole and the different colleges are becoming real aware of educating the people involved in missionary work. I think there could even be some education about differences in culture for people who stay in the States. Because even in the United States, anyone who is going to work in other parts of the country has to be aware that there are subtle cultural differences. If you are going to work effectively with the people, you've got to live within them and be aware of them. Otherwise, you're just a sore thumb; you stick out like a sore thumb. The greater understanding we have, the greater effectiveness we will have. When I changed my mind about being a medical doctor, I really didn't talk to anyone about it. I would not discourage anyone who is interested from doing this, because it is a good work. Any counseling and any real help that we can give this way would be good, because I think now that I could have gone ahead and become a doctor and been happy with it. The only situation that I saw was the hospital type situation, and so I closed my mind to it. I think I would have been happy with a mobile clinic-type situation; a bush-type doctoring and a ministry in which I could doctor a little while and then have a teaching effort as well. But this thought never entered my mind. And no one put this thought in my mind. So it is a real possibility and an effective tool that could be used.

Shackelford: When did you actually make up your mind to devote full time to evangelistic work?

Guild: I think by my junior year here. I did two years of work at a junior college before I came here and I started my work here in the summer. When I was into the fall of my first year here I had pretty well changed my mind.

Shackelford: In thinking specifically, (of course, counseling would be one area), of courses that should be offered on the undergraduate level for those preparing to go into a mission work, what would you say ought to be included in that?

Guild: I really hadn't given too much thought to answering this type of question. Certainly, the lessons that we can learn from the missionary activity in the New Testament are important. I think one of the most valuable courses I had was on a graduate level. It was also an undergraduate course at ACC. I don't know if there is such a course here at Harding; there wasn't when I was here. Let's see if I can remember the title of it. It was Mission and Expansion of the church. This really

gave an overall view of the growth of the church in the New Testament. The fantastic growth it had was because people were giving themselves. I don't know what courses are required now, but a real fervor could be incorporated in the survey and textual courses to see the church as it was and in the situation that it was. It was a beginning, a missionary effort and a part of the whole effort of the New Testament Christians. In each of our courses we need to see the vital need of a teaching zeal on the part of Christians and incorporate this into the lives of those who study whether they go into the mission field or not.

Shackelford: In thinking specifically in the field of missions, could you tell me of a few books that you've felt have been most helpful to you in stimulating your thinking or perhaps some authors? You didn't know you were going to have a Graduate Record Exam. Maybe there is one that comes to mind right off, or two or three.

Guild: Certainly I have done some reading of McGavern's which is very good in its approach and understanding of the study in missions. I'm not very good on recall right now. Books that deal, not necessarily with missionary methods, but with the attitudes and cultural differences are good to read, such as simple books like "The Sight of Language" and "Have We No Light?" Again these are just very simple books.

Shackelford: "The Ugly American?"

Guild: Yes, these things give you a picture of problems that you have to consider. If you don't consider them before you go, they might seem more severe to you when you get there. That is not to say that there won't be any problems when you get there, because there will be. But you'll have an acquaintance with them and you'll be able to cope with them.

Shackelford: Sonny, what are your plans now for the future work in Kenya, personally?

Guild: We are going back in November. We were there for two years. Brookside always sends their first term missionaries just for two years feeling that your first time out, you shouldn't make it a long one. Otherwise, you might get more discouraged and come home quicker for reviving. This time we are going back probably for a 3½ year stay until the spring of 1976. But again this is flexible with reference to the political situation and our own emotional stability, or if something should happen. But we have the understanding with Brookside that we are just working tour by tour. It is possible that we will serve another tour in Kenya after this next one, but we are just waiting to the end of it and we'll evaluate the work we have had and make the decision upon that.

Shackelford: Do you see that the political situation in Uganda is effecting your work in Kenya since you evidently border them?

Guild: Right now I haven't had any correspondence with anyone over there since this has happened, so I don't know how it is effecting things even now. It is very possible that it would not affect us at all because the borders of Tanzania and Uganda have a common boundary on the other side of the lake. It is my understanding that this is where the problems are right now. But it could have severe consequences on any effort in any East African community and it might put pressure on Kenya as the third party of the East African community. I don't know. This is all in the realm of possibility and it might not come about. Kenya is the most stable of the governments. Unless it becomes much more severe I really don't think it will have much significance on our work other than, of course, making the situation a bit uneasy because of not being sure how things are going.

Shackelford: How many workers do you think that you need in Kenya right now?

Guild: Quite a few more. In '70 our workers got up to 12, if I remember right. Now we are down to 7. Next year we are going to have a severe need in Nairobi, because 3 of the families are leaving. That leaves one worker there. We certainly want to keep our working force in Nairobi up to what it is. We don't want to get any more there, but the work is far enough along that we need this many people. I mean that there is a full time work for this many people. Then also we would like to expand in other areas, because we are just working in two areas, Nairobi and the Western province. There are other predominant tribes, (the Luo tribe is the second largest), in which no work in them has begun. In fact several of the predominant missionary efforts of other Christian religions are not having a great work in the Luo people. But some of them are just beginning and they are having great success there. So it is a real opportunity if we can get someone to go and work with the Luo people. And then, of course, there are several major cities that have no work in them, such as Nacuder and Mombasa on the coast. It would be a very hard place to work because of the concentration of the Moslem influence there, but it is not so dominant in the rest of the country. These places certainly need workers. I don't know if it will ever come about, but I would be interested in working with a tribe that has had no contact with Christianity at all. There are some tribes that are remote enough (maybe not geographically, but culturally), to want to refrain from having contact with outside influence. They are so remote that they don't even have scripture portions in their language. No one has even studied their languages, so this could be a real possibility.

Shackelford: We appreciate very much your coming by Harding. We are certainly interested in your work and want you to keep us informed if there is anything Harding can do. This was the reason for my choice to come here to work. I feel like that Harding is vitally interested in world missions. Some of our other schools are too, but we certainly wish you well in your future work.

Guild: Thank you. I am thankful for my work here - the schooling I had.