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Interview of Dow Merritt

Dow Merritt

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HARDING COLLEGE LIVING HISTORY OF MISSIONS

Interview with Dow Merritt by John Pennisi.

Pennisi: This is a recording of the work of Dow Merritt in Zambia. The first question that we have for brother Merritt concerns a brief historical outline of the work from the beginning to the present date, November, 1972. Brother Merritt, what was the date on which you went to Zambia?

Merritt: I went to Zambia in 1926, arrived there in August of 1926. At the time we arrived, brother Chort and brother Lawyer were at the mission, and that is all the work that was being done in Zambia. The work in Zambia was originated by brother Sherrod, who was an Australian. He went over in 1898 and started work in Bulawayo, in Rhodesia, as a stone mason, and worked at mission work on the side. He started work with his own people, teaching them to read. Then he started preaching to build a church in the native location, and from his first work, he sent preachers out. He sent people to South Africa, to Nisaland, and to Northern Rhodesia. An interesting thing was that he called his first preacher whom he sent out his "mustard seed".

Pennisi: When you went over, then, in 1926, brother Short, you say, and brother Lawyer were still there. They went over in what year?

Merritt: Brother Short went over in 1921, and brother Lawyer in 1923.

Pennisi: Did you find brother Sherrod still living at this time?

Merritt: Yes, he was still living.

Pennisi: How many congregations were existing and how many members of the church?

Merritt: Well, I couldn't tell you. There was one large congregation at Cindy Mission. Then, out in the village, two or three villages have small congregations. There was work in Rhodesia, down in Bulawayo and Salsbury that was carried on by the New Zealand church of Christ, which is a Christian church. All the work that we had in Rhodesia was started by brother Sherrod's work in Bulawayo.

Pennisi: When you arrived in 1926, you came only with your family, is that right?

Merritt: Yes, just with the family.

Pennisi: Did you begin work with the Cindy Mission?

Merritt: I began work and stayed there at Cindy Mission for a year, and then brother George M. Scott and his wife and daughter came over; so, that made it four families at Cindy, and we had already decided that two families would leave and start a new mission. The site had been picked at what became called Columbia Mission, which was about a hundred and forty miles from Cindy Mission. It was 90 miles up the railroad track and 60 miles out in the bush from there.

Pennisi: When you arrived in Cindy Mission in 1926, how many Christians were there?

Merritt: I couldn't tell you how many. Perhaps less than a hundred, but there had been a large congregation of Christians. There was an African worker, one of brother Sherrod's preachers, who had baptized a number of people--around 300. They

were mostly women. This African preacher had died after brother Short came, and these people began falling away. Mostly, I think, because the preacher was a very powerful sort of person, and they were influenced by him more than by his preaching.

Pennisi: Is Cindy Mission, or what was once Cindy Mission, in Zambia?

Merritt: It is in Zambia, but Cindy Mission has a mission station. It is not functioning any more. Missionaries live there, and work out from there, but there is no mission on the place. There is a small congregation that meets there, and the Berryhills and Miss Brutell live there, but it's not doing what we call mission work anymore. It is just a home for the missionary.

Pennisi: You have spent your entire period in Africa in this general vicinity have you not?

Merritt: Yes, in Zambia, and with the Latonga tribe. There are about five or six different tribes in Zambia. Latonga is one of the largest tribes.

Pennisi: What language do they speak?

Merritt: Chitonga language.

Pennisi: What is the religious background of the people that you worked with?

Merritt: They were animistic, ancestor worshippers.

Pennisi: Do they worship their immediate ancestor or several ancestors back, or what?

Merritt: They worship the old people; the names are memorized by the old women and those are the ones whom they worship, not the ones who have recently died.

Pennisi: It is someone who is several generations back then?

Merritt: Yes, it is the founders of it. They don't actually know them except the names, and they worship one God whom they call Laisa. Laisa controls the lightning, the thunder, the earthquake, the wind and rain, things like that.

Pennisi: Do they feel that he understands or do they feel that he's pretty distant?

Merritt: They feel that he is distant from them and he doesn't really care. Where they get their action is in the evil spirits, and they have all sorts of medicines and charms against these evil spirits. These witch doctors produce these charms. They manufacture them and sell them.

Pennisi: Is that the way that they make their living?

Merritt: That is the way that they make their living.

Pennisi: Do the members of the church who are converted from animism as it is called, after they have been in the church ten or twenty years and suffer some set back or illness, would they have a tendency perhaps under pressure to fall back into animism?

Merritt: Yes, they're pressured to come back and make the sacrifice and the worship that is required in order that this calamity may pass, like famine or someone is ready to die or does die, then he must be properly prepared for this.

Pennisi: And it may be his relatives that bring this pressure upon him?

Merritt: Yes. There was one old Christian who was about to die when we were there last time. His relatives, who were paga, tried to force his wife, who was also a Christian, to make the sacrifice that was necessary. They brought terrible pressure, and one of the old Christians knew about this, and he went over and the Elders (my son-in-law and daughter), and my wife and I were there. This older Christian came over and got the wife and talked to her with all the congregation around. He told her that the difficulties that she was in were known and gave her scriptures that he had written out. He read these to her to give her strength and to encourage her to resist this pressure. It is much better than an African should tell her than we, who didn't know what this was all about. And so, she was able to resist all of these pressures as far as we know and the man was buried when we were not there. When we heard of it, we went back there the second day after his death. The children had put a concrete block across the grave and had written on this block that the man had become a Christian on a certain date and had lived faithful to his Lord. When the relatives came over and saw this, they were saying, "What is all this, what you got under that? What is all this about?" They were quite upset about this concrete block. That was more or less copying what they had seen Europeans do.

Pennisi: What kind of sacrifices do these people offer? Is it a sacrifice of corn or of an animal or what?

Merritt: Well, the sacrifice can vary. One of the common sacrifices is pouring out beer on the ground. Another is to put out meat, soup or food. Another is to put beer out on the grave, and every day they notice that it is down and finally gone; so, they notice that the spirits do drink it.

Pennisi: They don't know what spirit, huh?

Merritt: The spirit actually doesn't know very much; so, a lot of times they will just put a platform out--put up sticks and make a platform--and they put old bones on it. The spirit doesn't know but what that was animal heads or whatever it was that they put out.

Pennisi: It's a religion then that they can bend around to almost any concept that they have?

Merritt: Yes.

Pennisi: What is the economical background of the people that you work with?

Merritt: They are farmers and cattle raisers. A man's wealth is in his herd. They try to buy cattle. That is a disadvantage a lot of times because it ought to be sold and gotten rid of because it is poor stock. They farm and they sell their grain, store enough to use; they grow corn and millet and sweet potatoes, and pumpkins, beans, etc. Their land belongs to the tribe; they don't own land themselves. Since the country has become independent and the Europeans have left the country, the government has taken over the farms that were abandoned, and they have sold these farms to Africans; so, some Africans do now own the farms and the land. The tradition is that the land does belong to the people and it is common.

Pennisi: What serious challenges have you had to overcome? What's the most difficult problem that you have had to face in your work in Africa?

Merritt: I think the most difficult problem is getting Christians to be spiritually minded. We can baptize them and they will obey commandment. They love to have what they have to do set in the form of commandments. It takes a lot of teaching to get them to realize that they must do what they know is right and that they must believe that it is right.

Pennisi: To think for themselves and to love the Lord and to work by faith in Him, this is the difficult part?

Merritt: That is the difficult part. It is easy to baptize a lot of people, and it is a temptation to baptize a lot of people because the church at home just loves to hear reports of a lot of baptisms, but it is not good judgement.

Pennisi: What did you find is the most effective means to bring these people to a living relationship to Christ?

Merritt: We just constantly taught them. The best method that we have found is the school, a daily school where you get the children in the school and the teacher sets an example and teaches them from the Bible, encourages them to read and the children take the message home.

Pennisi: You are not able to get adults in these schools?

Merritt: We used to have adults in the school, and actually our first schools were for adults where we taught reading, writing and arithmetic to people who had full beards. But after a while, these people saw that it was very difficult for them to learn, and they said that it was no use for an older person to try and undertake going to school. That causes difficulty because they said then that the Christian religion is for children too, and they, therefore, got that mixed up, but we found that is the most effective way. You've got Christian leaders that way.

Pennisi: How much do you teach the Bible in these daily schools? You have reading and writing and arithmetic and then do you have an hour or so where you teach only the Bible?

Merritt: Yes, we have a Bible class usually, and in the lower schools it is forty minutes. We have chapel, and we have prayers at night. We have singing, and it is a funny thing about a lot of places; they will quote a song just like they will quote the Bible. You have to be very careful about the songs that you use. Some songs that we sing we understand, but they take what we sing to be truth and gospel; so, you have to be careful about it.

Pennisi: You say that the school is the most effective means by which you teach. Is there a school in Zambia now?

Merritt: Yes, we have our high school. We had to turn all of our village schools. We had up to 25 village schools where we sent out Christian teachers. After the country became independent and they began to expand the educational system, the requirements were so great that we couldn't finance it; so, we turned the schools over to the government and they run these village schools. We still have our Christian teachers in some of them, and we have the privilege of teaching the scriptures in these schools.

Pennisi: Are these teachers from the United States?

Merritt: Oh no, they are African teachers.

Pennisi: Are the students that come boarding students?

Merritt: No, they are from their homes. We have one boarding school for girls which is a primary school, and that is at Kalomo. Then, we have this high school, and it is a boarding school for boys and girls. There are less than 300, and they are all from Form I through form V. That's through one year college.