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Interview of Howard Horton

Howard Horton

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HARDING COLLEGE HISTORY OF LIVING MISSIONS

Interview with Howard Horton by Van Tate

Tate: This is Van Tate with Howard Horton on the 6th of September, 1973 and we are going to talk a little bit about some of Howard's experiences in Nigeria and Japan and Hawaii. Howard, it is a real pleasure to have you here and we would like for you to just respond briefly to these questions and then they will be stored in our tape library and also will be typed out for our students to read. First of all, would you give us a brief, historical outline of the work from the beginning to date. Let's say, start with the Nigerian work and then add a little bit of your Japanese experience and also in Hawaii.

Horton: Thank you, Van. I am sure the history of the work in Nigeria is documented fairly well in the minds of most who are familiar with that work at all. But, as you know, it began through the efforts of a correspondence course distributed during World War II. A Nigerian policeman learned of the course and through it became a Christian and began persuading Americans to come and to teach Nigerian preachers. Eldred Echols and Boyd Reese were the first ones to enter. They went up from Rhodesia for two weeks to make contact with these new converts and from that began the efforts on the part of Americans. I went there in 1952. There were 64 little congregations already in existence at that time. When we came back to the states a little more than two years later the Nigerian preachers had increased this number to about 185 congregations. It has continued to grow. The Biafran secession was a traumatic experience but I think out of it the churches and the preachers have become stronger. They are continuing to grow. They are baptizing converts quite regularly and the number of congregations now is well over 600 I understand.

In Japan, I went to teach English Bible in the college, Ibaraki Christian College, but it happened that right during that period the change of administration came about and now the school is completely under Japanese administration. No funds from America go formally to the school itself. But we revised the program in which now Americans simply work in the class rooms, especially in the area of spoken English. English as a second language and we have initiated a student evangelism program on campus and we feel that after two years experience in this that it's offering a much more valid spiritual approach to the students than we have been able to have for several years. While the Americans were administering, the students looked on Christianity as a foreign religion fastened on them by American administration, but now they are more relaxed, and the professors are more relaxed. Americans are not in competition for administrative roles, and so more have been baptized during 1973 than has been true in any period perhaps during the last ten years. So, we feel that the change of direction, while offering some doubts as to the future of the school in the long run, right at the moment, really gives a more spiritual impact on the students than was possible when we were looking at it from an institutional approach rather than simply working with the students as teachers.

Tate: Do you know what percentage of the student body is Christian now?

Horton: Well, I did have some figures while I was there. Those figures now are two years old, but less than 10 percent of the students are Christians when they come to the college, and a few were being converted each year. Of course, in Japan, of the total population, no more than 3 percent are Christian in any sense of the term. As they come to us in the school, most of the students, you might say practically all of them, are Buddhist, Shinto background.

Tate: Are they practicing this religion?

Horton: Not really, the younger people look on their Buddhism and Shintoism as family traditions, and they practice it as a family tradition. They say, "We are born and marry Buddhist, we live and die Shinto." The daily life in the home is the ancestor relationship with the little shrines in the home. The birth is related to the temple or shrine. Marriage is predominately Buddhist in connection with the temples, but in Japan you have a strange mixture of Buddhism and Shintoism, but to the young people especially, this is largely tradition. It doesn't have a great deal of religious significance.

Tate: What is the enrollment of Iraraki Christian now?

Horton: The enrollment last year, my last year of teaching there, was about 2,200. They have increased the enrollment this year, so I would estimate that perhaps near 2,500 on the campus. Now this includes four schools; a junior high school, a senior high school, a junior college of two years and a senior college of all four years. Each of these is, in a sense, a separate school with its own principal or dean directing it. In the total student body, there is approximately 2,500 students.

Tate: Now more recently you have been in Hawaii. When did you go there, and what have you been doing?

Horton: I came to Honolulu in December. Early in January, I began on a writing project that some of us are hoping to develop into a Bible learning curriculum that will be, not only useful in English but will be as basically Biblically orientated as we can make it so that the translated ability of the Bible can be borrowed by this curriculum making it adaptable with as little difficulty as possible for use in the missionary fields in various languages. So I have been giving all of my time to study and writing during the last eight months.

Tate: Now what are you writing? What subject matter?

Horton: Specifically at this point, I am developing an adult series, hopefully a mature adult series which I am calling, simply, "God's Eternal Purpose." It is aimed as a framework for a total look at the Bible. Then our aim is, within this framework, to develop a curriculum from two years through advanced adult, for use in English and then for adaption in other languages. We have persons now in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand and Greece who have agreed to test the materials and to advise as to the practicality of its translation into a specific language of these countries. And, hopefully, other languages would have a look at it and see if it is practical. Some from Brazil have indicated a real interest in the possible adaptation to Portuguese.

Tate: Well, this is very good, because I think this is one of the things we are really hurting for in our foreign work is proper materials with the culture in mind. Now, let us move on here, Howard, to the religious background of the people with whom you work. You have worked in such a variety of cultures. First, in Nigeria and Japan, and now in Hawaii. Give us just a little bit.....you have already spoken of the religious background of the people in Japan.....give us a little bit of your experience in Nigeria, the religious background of those people.

Horton: Well, of course the distant background and therefore a very powerful immediate background influence in Nigeria is the typical African animism that stands behind all primitive religions as we term them today. In Nigeria, there has been, however, a very powerful influence for Christendom. Denominational groups have been there for

more than a century. The year I entered Nigeria, the Baptist missions were celebrating their first centennial. The church of Scotland has been there much longer, and the church of Scotland had given to the Nigerians a written Bible. So there were many influences that were there. In fact, the denominational influences have been there so long that there have arisen some African animistic Christian combinations that were very close to basic concepts of Christianity. Others, with certain Christian terms, are simply cast in the animistic pattern of the ancient tradition. I hardly know how to describe them. You see, we have the animistic influences, the Christian influences, and Catholicism is very strong. One year that we were there, a chartered plane, loaded with priests and nun missionaries, flew from Ireland to Nigeria to pick up work in Nigeria.

Tate: What do you think of the response to the church and to the plea of restoration of Christianity? Has this response come primarily from those who have been in denominations, or from the animistic peoples?

Horton: From both. I think we must recognize that our work in Nigeria would have taken an altogether different tact had it not been for the ground work; the spade work that had been done by denominational missionaries who preceded them by centuries or more. We owe a debt to them for what they did, and the thing that impressed me there most in those early years of the work, was that the early denominational missionaries had built such a healthy respect for scripture into the Nigerians who were not acquainted with the Bible at all. When these denominations, influenced by liberal theology moved away from scripture, these were left almost without anchor, and to them the most refreshing thought was that they could simply take the scriptures, study the scriptures, follow the scriptures, and be what God intended for them to be in Christ. To them, this was a thrilling thought. So a great part of that early work was very much as the restoration movement as we term it in America. A call on those who had a respect for the Bible to take it seriously, and then simply to act upon what they learned there. However, we found that simply a Biblical affirmation also had a very special meaning to the animist who were almost totally disillusioned by the animistic priesthoods that had little to offer in the modern world. There was a tremendous vacuum. We live right out in the bush, and in these bush villages, the animistic rituals of the witch doctors had become all that their work implies. And it is interesting, in their language, their word for all of this dancing and gibberish that goes with the animistic ceremony, their word for it is, "play," as in the old Hebrew. "They sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." Our younger people are taking that quite literally. Those rituals are "play" in the modern sense of that word.

Tate: Now, would you like to add something to the cultural and economic background of these people? The culture of course, is bound to Nigeria, and the economy, I am quite sure, is pretty agrarian in its nature.

Horton: Well, exceedingly so. Especially at the time we were there. The figures then were 50 percent unemployment. Of the 50 percent employment, far more than 50 percent of that was in subsistence farming. Just growing enough to live on. Much industry is entering Japan. They are exporting many agriculture products now; peanuts, for example, and they have very rich tin mines.

Tate: Now, this is Japan that you are talking about.

Horton: No, this is Nigeria. Nigeria, six years ago, was thirteenth as a nation in world production of oil, and they have moved above that now and have become exceedingly oil rich in off shore explorations. So, Nigeria is becoming more and more an economic nation. Of course, the economic explosion in Japan has created world wide attention. The affluence there is making great changes in the whole society of Japan.

Tate: Okay, Howard, have you faced any serious challenges that you would like to share with us in these different works? Say, you were one of the early men to go into Nigeria, and your experiences there were really unique for our people at the time. Did you face any unique challenges that you were able to meet and contribute to the well-being of those people?

Horton: Well, I think, Van, that the challenges were so overwhelming that I could not even recognize the extent of them at the time. At that time, we had no preparation for missionary work in the brotherhood, so, we went in with a great deal of ignorance of the specifics of mission work. We went with the overwhelming desire to help these native preachers, the Nigerian men who had come to accept the scriptures and simply to teach them. I felt in my own work there, that my primary work was to endeavor to have men who were so committed to Christ that they would preach the gospel whether they were supported or not. At the same time, to endeavor to develop congregations who would see that they wouldn't suffer while they did that. In the period that we were there, we were not exceedingly successful in bring it to fruition simply because there was not time, and the massive conversions that were there brought with it the importance of grounding the churches, of nurturing them, and, I think, through a school of preaching we were able to move some men out into those areas that could contribute to the nurturing of the churches. The whole problem is when you have hundreds being converted, whole congregations, it raises the question of commitment in that massive conversion. But, I sat down with a group of these who in three weeks one of the Nigerian preachers had baptized 1,388. I remember the figure because of the utter impossibility of it: Five new congregations. I could but not feel that this was, to some extent, fraud. But, then they began to send word for us to visit them, and again and again, they came with something of an idea of two young men with whom I talked to who had been teachers in the Presbyterian school system. When they were baptized by immersion for remission of sins, they were immediately fired, and the young men were telling me that they had lost their jobs, and one of them said, "I couldn't deny the truth for the sake of my job, could I?" I began to wonder if my quick evaluation of fraud was not maybe mistaken. I think it goes back to the fact that they had had built into them by the earlier missionaries of the denominations, such a healthy respect for the word, that when they saw what the word taught, they really wanted to do it. It was not all that sudden a thing, because we inherited it in them; already a healthy reception, it was simply a matter of what Aquilla and Priscilla did for Apollos. Therefore, it was not all that new a thing, and we found in some of them great strength. One of those young men later went to the school of preaching to later become an outstanding preacher and teacher. Another one out of that area went to the school of preaching and was very active in the early ages of the work in countries outside of Nigeria.

Tate: So, some of these men were actually beginning to take the missionary spirit right on their own.

Horton: Yes, the Nigerians themselves went over to the island of Fernando Pol, just off the coast of Africa where there were big banana plantations. They went over there for work and it wasn't long until we heard of a congregation among the banana workers on Fernando Pol. The work to the east, at Coomba, in the Cameroons, was basically started first by Nigerians who went over there and again, working on banana plantations and various activities where they went for employment. Through them, Americans first went to the Cameroons. A man who received some of the training, is not in the heart of the work in Ghana, and Nigerians of one dialect deliberately went and learned dialects of their own in order to preach, and they started work. In fact, the work among the Ebo people was from among the Ebebia, with whom we work. A young man went up to learn the Ebo language in order that he might preach to the Ebos, and in essence, was doing foreign mission work. Some

went up into the Moslem areas in northern Nigeria. They have been very evangelistic, when I went in '68, trying to get back into the area of the secession. I ran up on some that I had known when I was over there and a group had come to Lagos, and for 18 months, they met under a tree in a park and had established a congregation there in this capital of Nigeria, in Lagos. Another one of the men from the preacher's training school who was in another congregation, so in Lagos, there were several congregations that had just sprung up because Christians from the eastern area moved there and began to preach Christ.

Tate: What do you know about the work, right now, in 1973, since the war, things have changed tremendously, and difficult for Americans to get visas to get in there. Dr. Henry Farrar was able to get in, but with great difficulty, because of his medical abilities and so on. But do we have any Medical missionaries in Nigeria now and what are they doing?

Horton: Yes, there are some there. At this hospital near where Dr. Farrar was, Billy and Jerri Nicks are there and have been for two or three years, and working in the school of preaching, and he's there as administrator of the hospital. A Nigerian doctor is now doing the medical work since Dr. Farrar is back in the States. In farther East, brother Bob Prater is working in connection with a little trade school there. Brother Ralph Perry was in Nigeria for at least two years back at Oopong in a Bible training school there. He's recently returned to the States and I learned just last week in Lubbock, that two or three men associated with the Sunset School of Preaching had just received their visas to go to Lagos and to establish, in a sense, a branch of the Sunset School of Preaching in Lagos. I've not heard any further detail on that but they had just received word that their visas had come through. There is a trickling of visas. A group of nine or ten were in Nigeria for two or three weeks, just this summer for evangelism, but it's very difficult to get visas, especially into the eastern area where the secession took place. Anyone who goes there must be cleared through the Defense Ministry and that's extremely difficult.

Tate: These men that are going over there every summer, will this be a continuing thing? At least this is one method that we can use to get into Nigeria on the short-term basis...

Horton: That even is not always possible. I've heard of others who attempted to go in but who simply couldn't get a visa. Year before last, a group of men were in West Africa, and they got to Lagos expecting to enter but were able to enter only for a short time, not for a period of evangelism.

Brother Wendall Broom hopes to go next summer for one year. He, of course, is in the Missions department at Abilene and he was telling me that he was having very much difficulty. He had tried to go before but the visa had been turned down.

Tate: Now, you have mentioned the training schools, let's get this together on one point on the tape, how many training schools, that you know of, are in existence in Nigeria?

Horton: Well, there is one located in the Southeastern State, it is called now, it used to be the Eastern Region. This is at Oopoom in the Habok district. This is the original one, established when we were there in 1952-53. Then there is a second one among the Ebo people, up to the north. This was established by Billy Nicks who is there again now. It's located at Onicha near Ada, the same campus with the hospital where Dr. Farrar has been. These are the only two formally organized schools of preaching.

Tate: Do you have any idea how many students are in those two schools?

Horton: At the present, I don't know. The one at Oopoom is now under the direction of a Nigerian and I talked three weeks ago with a Nigerian whom I had known there and who is now studying in Central State University, Murfreesboro, Tenn.. He indicated that it is a very low ebb right now but efforts are being made in Nashville for a renewed effort for a revived truthfulness of that work. The one at Onichawho is under the direction of the Nigerians, brother Stephen Okowoncho, he's a graduate of Oklahoma Christian College. It's going quite well, Billy Nicks is there in the roll of advisor and teaching, but it's apparently doing quite well.

Tate: We want to get a question in here about American support for the national preachers. I know there have been times when a number of men have been supported and then the support was withdrawn and then taken back up again. Do you have any current information on how many of these people may be supported by American churches at this point?

Horton: No, I don't. I've not had that much recent contact. I doubt that there are many since the war. I think the war simply cut off any contact there. Now when I went to Nigeria in 1968, together with Reese Bryant, we found quite a number of preachers, who before the war had been on support but who were now supporting themselves by subsistence farming. They were continuing to preach and we were very glad to find that their preaching had not depended all together on their support and that they did not cease preaching simply because they had to go to work to earn a living for their family. How many are being supported right at this time, I do not know.

Tate: It might be interesting to include this on the tape. In talking to Wendell Broom three or four years ago, and he was directly involved in cutting off the support of these men, and he said that at one time they thought that nearly every time they would quit preaching when the salaries were cut and he was pleasantly surprised that only about 10% of those men did quit preaching. This says a great deal for the faith of those Nigerian people.

Horton: I think so, Van, this is an extremely difficult question. I think that an absolute in either direction would, perhaps, do an injustice to the spread of the Gospel. I've never been convinced that the color of a man's face, nor the source of the money, was a deciding factor in whether or not he would be supported to preach the gospel. I think when I was there, we became in a way, trapped by the urgency to have men out in these areas, nurturing the churches, and the impossibility of having enough Americans to do it. Simply, the feeling that the men should live and have some means of living and we, as Americans, were extremely delighted to support a man to preach the gospel for ten or twelve dollars a month. The end result was, as in anything; there were some who were unworthy, who were supported, and there were some who became unworthy and should have been cut off before they were. There were some who, perhaps, were supported enough to do their most effective work, and some who were most worthy of support. There's a great deal of area of judgment today, but the emphasis in the school of preaching while I was there was, the purpose of a man's preaching was not to make a living. The emphasis that we tried to give was that men be ready to preach the gospel and continue to preach the gospel, whether they were supported or not, and that the support was simply the wish of their brothers and sisters that they not suffer while they were doing this and that they be able to give their time to it.

Tate: Can you tell me this in regard to language. Have any of the American personnel learned a language over there?

Horton: No, and I think this is one of the interesting things about the work, that there has never been a missionary in Nigeria among the churches of Christ who could preach in the language. It has all been done by translation by interpreters. In fact, there have been very few who could even converse with any degree in real conversation in a Nigerian dialect. This is not to say that this is the way to do mission work, but it is to say that something can be done where an American can be humble enough to be the servant of a translator and a translator is humble enough to be the servant of an American brother. Together, they are simply servants to the Master.

Tate: We were talking about the language problems, and I think one of the observations is, that though it is important that we learn the language of the people when we can, this certainly shouldn't be a hindrance to our going and serving, and certainly the experiences in Nigeria show us that the church can grow mightily even though the missionaries might not know the national language. Even if that is less than ideal, it still shows that the Lord can use us in whatever capacity we work. Now, I would like to ask a question about what you would advise in improving the situation in Nigeria. You have been away from the Nigerian work, and it may be a little unfair to you to ask that question at this point, but, if you have any suggestions about what we might do right now, this would be good to hear.

Horton: As you have indicated, Van, I am, because of being away from it so long, unqualified to give any kind of judgment that could be considered in any way determinative. Because of the experience that we had in Nigeria, I would be very deeply concerned that if in some way we would be able to keep enough people there to hold up the hands of the Nigerian men who are becoming more and more mature in their Christian faith. I think the war has demonstrated that the work in Nigeria must move in the direction of being largely on its own. If there can be dedicated people who can go even for a short time, simply to encourage and to teach as they are able, to hold up the hands and keep a bond of fellowship and a mutual love with the people of Nigeria, that we may find in the future, that this can be more fruitful than trying to build a life commitment. An American, sometimes, can be as much in the way as he can be of help. Sometimes the greatest service an American missionary can render to a work is to get out of the way, and the condition in Nigeria reflects pretty much a world-wide situation that not all nations, anymore, are looking for persons who will bury their bones among them as they are really dedicated Christians who can give them something that they then in turn can take hold of and use in their country, whether it be a period of two years or a period of twelve years, or however long the length of time. I am not convinced that the opportunities are going to continue to be demanding the same kind of a life-time commitment that some of the very undeveloped nations have wanted and expected in the past.

Tate: We would like to ask, inclosing, what your own immediate plans are now.

Horton: Well, for the last six or seven years, Mildred and I have been just kind of following doors that open and then leaving the other end open-ended so that we can stay as long as that particular work seems to respond to what we can give them. We spent one year in Vietnam working with the refugee children until professional people were there and could handle that job on a professional basis. We were three and one half years in Japan. We went for two years, but it seemed wise that that be extended and our plans being open-ended, we were just able to say that we would stay until the time seemed convenient. So, we were three three and one-half years in a period of transition at Ibaraki Christian College. Right now, I am in Honolulu working on some Bible curriculum materials that we hope will be helpful in English, but, especially, we are hopeful that it can be so Biblically grounded that it will borrow the translated ability of the Bible and can lend itself to adaptation for missionary work in various

parts of the world. Again, I am there on a two-year assignment with an open end depending on the fruitfulness of the project and the advisability of my continuing in it. I am very concerned right at this point with written materials for missionary work. The American idiom is difficult enough in mission fields. Most other countries learn English in terms of the British idiom. So, pure American idiom is difficult. Then, when you have regional American idiom, you complicate even more the problem of translation. American illustrations often don't illustrate to the alien. A forward pass in football is hardly known in any other part of the world than in our own country for example. So, we are hopeful that we can develop the materials, the concepts of the materials Biblically that a person familiar with other languages can substitute the merely illustrative material and eliminate it and replace it but that the Biblical concept will still be there and need only illustration and adaptation of idiom. How, this task is too great for us, of course.

Tate: Well, thank you very much, Howard, for your time and for sharing these experiences and these plans with us, and may God bless you in your work.

Horton: Thank you, Van, it has been good to be here, and I am sorry that my part of it is so suddenly hatched up.