

11-27-1970

Interview of Elvis Huffard

Elvis H. Huffard

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Recommended Citation

Huffard, E. H. (1970). Interview of Elvis Huffard. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.harding.edu/missions-history/6>

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Living History of Missions

Volume II, No. 4

I am Evertt Huffard and shall be interviewing Elvis Huffard who has served some time in the field in Sierre Leon.

Evertt Huffard: Elvis, I wonder if you could give us some of the historical background of the work of the church in Sierre Leon?

Elvis Huffard: About 1964, Dr. Orlando Price, a national from Sierre Leon, was in South Carolina attending school and preaching for a colored congregation. While there he came in contact with the Church of Christ and in time obeyed the gospel. He returned to Sierre Leon with the idea in mind of preaching the pure gospel of Jesus Christ to his people. Soon after his conversion, he became acquainted with the fact that he had cancer. He realized that his time on earth was limited, but uppermost was the desire to bring the gospel of Christ to Sierre Leon to his people. In 1964 he returned to Sierre Leon and while there he continued to make appeals to the United States for someone to come and help him in his great task. One or two men went for a short length of time and then returned to the United States. In 1965 while teaching at Freed-Hardeman College, I was contacted by the Vultee and UNA congregations in Nashville to go to Sierre Leon for at least one year and help stabilize the work and continue in the work that Brother Price started. I agreed to go and unfortunately Brother Price died before I got there. A few weeks before I went, Eugene Paden went over for three months and two of us together after I arrived worked together in trying to salvage the good that Brother Price had done before he died.

Evertt Huffard: I understand that you had been in the mission field even before that. Is that right?

Elvis Huffard: Yes, this is one reason I was invited to leave Freed-Hardeman College and go to Sierre Leon. I had spent some time in Nigeria back in the early work of the church among the Nigerians. I was the founder of the Christian school system of Nigeria and the people who are acquainted with the appeal from Sierre Leon thought maybe a work like we had done in Nigeria could be duplicated in Sierre Leon, a work dealing with training gospel preachers, Christian education and congregational development.

Evertt Huffard: Could you find a great deal of difference in the work in Sierre Leon and the work in Nigeria?

Elvis Huffard: Not a great deal. In fact, as I have visited several countries in west Africa, it seems that the people are very much alike. Sierre Leon is not as densely populated as Nigeria and since much of our work in Nigeria had been among the rural people we didn't do the amount of work we did in Nigeria because of the lack of people being in the rural areas. But I moved to Freetown, the capital of Sierre Leon and we started our work in the large city which was a little bit different from doing the work which we did in the bush country in Nigeria. The people are more sophisticated and perhaps a little slower to respond than the people in Nigeria were.

Evertt Huffard: Give us something of the religious background of the people in Sierre Leon.

Elvis Huffard: The background is very much like West Africa. There is quite a bit of idol worshipping and also the worship of Satan. Many of the tribes still take their girls and boys and take them out and dedicate them to Satan first. Funerals are conducted by priests of Satan and, then, of course, in addition to this you have your denominational churches that have been in West Africa for a number of years. The people did have a respect for the word of God and we tried to build upon that respect when we contacted the people of Sierre Leon.

Evertt Huffard: Did you find it difficult to convert them to Christianity?

Elvis Huffard: I am afraid much of our work in many of these countries have had very little contact with the people that were not exposed to denominationalism. Most of our converts came from the denominational preachers being there and cultivating an interest in the Bible and the approach that we made in most cases by people that were interested was a Biblical approach where we encouraged them to reason out the scriptures a little more perfectly and since they had had an introduction to the scriptures, it was not too difficult to get them to go all the way.

Evertt Huffard: In other words you capitalized on the progress the denominations had made in the area?

Elvis Huffard: Yes. After all, we were kept busy and just going to a village or to a public building and the people that came kept us busy and usually the people that came had already had an exposure to the Biblical teaching from the influence of the denominational people around. Very few of the animists really came to hear our preaching.

Evertt Huffard: Could you give us something of the cultural and economic background of the people with whom you worked?

Elvis Huffard: Again, Sierre Leon was very much like many other places in West Africa. You just have two classes of people. The VIP's and then those that are extremely poor people. So far we have reached very few VIP's. Most of our thrust has been to those who are very poor people, maybe getting by on a few shillings a day, if they were employed. Of course, this has many advantages because responses were very ready. The people realized they needed something and often turned to Christianity to fulfill the need that they had within themselves. I yet do not know what progress could have been made had we made a thrust to the VIP's of the area. So far in West Africa our work has been among the poor class people who seem more ready to turn to something more stable than what they have in every day life in their economic conditions at the present.

Evertt Huffard: Do you feel that some of this response, or a great deal of it, was to gain economically by being a Christian?

Elvis Huffard: There is no doubt about that because we did have a problem at first just as you have in most countries when you go in with your first effort. Often times the first people to respond are opportunists looking for something to better themselves by, maybe a trip to America or a job that would pay them better than the national standard. There was no difference in Nigeria. For this reason we decreased in numbers within three or four months after I arrived because the people found out that we were not there to employ them or send them to America or give them an education. Many of them lost interest and it did become sort of a problem. Of course, when they come to you and seem to be interested, you do not have the insights that Jesus had who could perceive the thoughts of their hearts and we had to always take them in good

faith but in time we found out that other motivations were present other than salvation that could be found in Christ.

Evertt Huffard: What is the situation there that makes you think Sierre Leon is a good field for the preaching of the gospel?

Elvis Huffard: When Dr. Price first started preaching in about 1964 and then when I went in 1965, about 100 people had been baptized. Of course, we had some problems because many of them did not know what it was all about. Many of them were opportunists. About three months after I arrived, we had one faithful man out of that 100. It was a little bit discouraging, but having confidence in the seed that was being sown, the gospel of Christ, we felt that it had a bright future and we had this confidence because economically, culturally and many other ways the people of Sierre Leon were just like the people in Nigeria. We continued to work with the people without them suspecting they could have many fringe benefits by becoming Christians. Now, within a space of four years, we have over 50 congregations scattered throughout Sierre Leon. We feel this is good progress and it has come at a time when they are not encouraged in any way to see becoming a Christian as a possibility of coming to America for added fringe benefits.

Evertt Huffard: What method do you largely use in the work there?

Elvis Huffard: We have used the going to the people, getting someone in the village interested and making appointments for us. Oftentimes we go to the village at the invitation of the chiefs of the villages. Calling the people together and presenting the New Testament plea of Christianity and then working from that to try to start a congregation in the community. Then, we continued with making contacts in the bigger cities like Freetown. In the meantime, ads were placed in the paper for the people to take Bible correspondence courses and as these courses were completed certificates would be given and many of them after completing a course would want to be baptized. These contacts came throughout the country of Sierre Leon. Often times these contacts would be the nucleus of starting a congregation in the area. No telling how many of these 50 congregations started in this manner--by someone taking and finishing a correspondence course, obeying the gospel, becoming zealous and wanting to work from there. In addition to that we have started a Bible Training College for the young men that seemed to be good prospects for gospel preachers. These young men in time did a more effective job than we can do with our own people. They understand the customs; they understand what the people are doing; they are in a better position to reach the people and communicate with the people than we could. You have the Bible Training College that we had for the young men. At the same time we had an invitation to go to Sierre Leon, opportunities began to show up to direct a Christian school. Much of the education in Sierre Leon is still dependent upon voluntary agencies providing the educational opportunities. Most of the volunteer agencies are religious institutions. When I first went there in 1965, Dr. Orlando Price had a small school and I became the overseer of that school. The headmistress was Dr. Price's wife. She took the responsibility and I used my influence in teaching the Bible and making it a small private Christian school. After that another man who had a private school who belonged to a denominational group obeyed the gospel and he in turn started teaching the Bible to his students. This man is a blind man and with a little financial assistance from the United States he continued with his school. This is another method that we have used. The methods in summarizing, would be, of course, preaching the gospel to groups of people and then the Bible correspondence course, the Bible training college for the young people and then these small elementary schools of teaching the academic studies and the Bible class every day.

Evertt Huffard: Was English the language commonly used there?

Elvis Huffard: In many west African countries, you have your tribal languages. In Sierre Leon there are seven major ones. Most of the children that go to school are exposed to English in their first year of school. I suppose that if you had a universal language the English language would be that universal language. Being Americans, our most effective contacts we made in our Bible training college and in our correspondence work with the prospective leaders for the churches in Sierre Leon. You could communicate with them by speaking English. Of course, they would speak sort of a pigeon English but most of them, if they had any education at all, could understand English and speak English. I would say that 90% of the people that you can really depend upon in the leadership of the church already understand English.

Evertt Huffard: Who has followed the work there in Sierre Leon?

Elvis Huffard: Before I left, about three months, Paul Billingham came from Nashville and stayed two years. He was followed by others such as John Beckloff who has just recently returned from Sierre Leon. John did a great deal in developing the opportunities for advancing the school. He has provided good leadership, and, of course, there have been six or seven Americans that are in Sierre Leon at the present time.

Evertt Huffard: Are they continuing with the same methods that were used when you were there? Have they added some new methods of work?

Elvis Huffard: Just about the same. I guess due to the success of these methods that I have been talking about in Nigeria, we have felt that being the same kind of people they would be successful in Sierre Leon. Most of the people that have been interested in furthering the work in Sierre Leon have had interest in the years through the work in Nigeria. I don't know if there is anything really new that we have been doing in Sierre Leon because what we have done seems to be very successful.

Evertt Huffard: There is no method, in other words, that you tried and has just proven a failure?

Elvis Huffard: Not really. I think if we had used just one method and emphasized that one method we probably would have not been as successful. If I were evaluating the methods that we used, I would put the Bible Training College for young preachers at the very top because I believe this has a stabilizing influence on the conversions that are made. A number of people would come to hear us preach because we were Americans, but oftentimes in contacting the mass of the people you have to use an interpreter and this is really not as effective as being able to talk to people face to face. I believe that when once these young people were trained they did go out and perform a very useful service in advancing the kingdom of Christ. I still believe that the real stable growth comes from utilizing the ability that the nationals have.

Evertt Huffard: I think it has been several years since you were in Sierre Leon. Since you have been away for some time, is there any connection that you now have with the work while you are in the States?

Elvis Huffard: Not really--only once it gets in your blood it is kind of hard to get rid of it. I am in contact with the West African work. I belong to African Christian Schools Foundation. I am a charter member of it. The primary purpose of this foundation is to promote Christian education in West Africa. We are doing a little work in Christian education in Sierre Leon. Of course, since the same men have been closely associated with the Nigerian work and the work in Sierre Leon, we naturally get

together quite frequently and we seek out the advice of others from time to time so I am called upon quite a bit to help in the work in Sierre Leon.

Evertt Huffard: You mentioned the training school was one of the most successful methods. How many native preachers do you think are now in Sierre Leon?

Elvis Huffard: I do not have the figure available, but I would think at least 25 or 30 that can be depended upon can be found in Sierre Leon at the present time. Of course, again, I suppose we can expect individual differences here in their abilities but yet when we think in terms of when I left there in 1966 we didn't have any. I don't believe it is wise to just expose them a little bit and send them out because I think Sierre Leon could afford to wait for some good prepared men to go out and keep in touch with these 50 congregations that now exist in Sierre Leon.

Evertt Huffard: From your experience that you have had in Nigeria and in Sierre Leon, what would be your conclusion as to churches in America supporting the national preachers?

Elvis Huffard: This is a difficult question to just give a one way or the other answer. I think it depends a great deal because in many ways the culture is different. You have your extremely poor people and the VIP's and very few people in between. We in America may not know how to evaluate a country that doesn't have a middle class. I think we could and have supported nationals in Nigeria and Sierre Leon from American churches. There are some arguments in favor of continuing to do it and there are some that might be an encouragement to do it no longer. As I think about the Nigerian situation, for years American congregations have supported national preachers. This enabled them to give full time to their work. They went to an extreme trial in their last civil war with the Biafrans uprising. The church has survived that uprising and during the hear of the civil war no money at all was sent to these preachers and everyone was poverty stricken. The church has survived and is now perhaps stronger after the war than before the war. I believe that American money can be used effectively to support national preachers, but it should be wisely used and not unwisely used. The Nigerians were not put on an American standard of income, but in time they were put on a more realistic income that would be comparable to what they would make in a similar situation in Nigeria. With that experience in Nigeria, when nationals were employed in Sierre Leon, we tried to not make it extra tempting to them because of an American salary. It has been used with the idea that the Africans in time should take the financial responsibility for the preaching of the gospel. We believe that this has been effective because the church has grown and spread into other countries. Two neighboring countries from Sierre Leon where American men could not go because of their Marxist leanings, preachers from Sierre Leon have entered and now there are groups meeting, worshipping God every Lord's day. Money has been used from American churches to support these nationals in Nigeria and Sierre Leon.

Evertt Huffard: Would you say then that there are churches there that are self-supporting and self-propagating?

Elvis Huffard: Yes. There are some that are not only that but are evangelistic in encouraging their men or supporting their men financially to go into what we would call mission areas in their country and also in neighboring countries.

Evertt Huffard: Are there any congregations there without elders or do you foresee the possibility in the near future?

Elvis Huffard: I am not able to say about Sierre Leon because that is still just a few years old, but we do have elders in Nigeria. Some of them have really had to develop in order to be qualified because in Nigeria, I am quite sure you would have about the same problems in rural areas as in Sierre Leon, is the problem of pologamy. Some of the chiefs have given up their wives and been active in the church and have become elders. I know one in particular that I just saw last September. He had four wives. He has built houses in back of his for these different wives. He no longer lives with them on a husband wife situation, but he built these houses nearby so he could continue this responsibility toward the children that they had. He put them away and he is very active as an elder in the church and is very influential in that area.

Evertt Huffard: You know that in our MISSION/PREPARE program here at Harding we want to do everything that we can to prepare young people to go to different sections of the world. You have noticed that as yet we have very few that are going into Africa from the present ones here at Harding. What would you suggest as far as Harding College is concerned that could be done to assist in building an interest among the students and preparing them to go to Africa to work?

Elvis Huffard: I think first of all would be to get someone on the faculty that has had experience in Africa and that still has a wholesome attitude and an optimistic attitude toward the possibilities in Africa. I think it is a continent that we cannot afford to overlook. There are many wonderful opportunities there and I think all it needs is the story to be told. I do find that in our southland there are those who might give money to do mission work in Africa but because of the color situation they can't be interested beyond taking a paternalistic attitude toward the African work. In time this attitude seems to be reflected in becoming less and less interested. I am quite sure that many are discouraged because in our present day and time with everyone desiring self-realization it is very difficult for them to adjust to their idea that they need to go to Africa and see the black man as a brother and see him as an intelligent being. Africa is no longer to be looked upon as the dark country where you can go and be the big father of all of them over there. The story needs to be told by those who have had experience and those that do not look upon Africa as a dark and heathenistic country but as a continent with an open door where people are receptive and where people long to have the gospel of Christ. My experience in Nigeria and Sierre Leon has been that people will walk for miles to get a piece of Christian literature. Our problem is that we do not have time to fulfill all the invitation that we have. It is a crying shame that a country like this should be neglected but we must keep in mind that it should not be looked upon as a place where we go and these people will bow to us and welcome us with open arms, but these are individualistic countries that have intelligent people in them that need the gospel of Christ.

Evertt Huffard: In closing can you think of any advice that would be helpful to give to the students who are studying mission work in preparing to go to Sierre Leon, Nigeria or any other of the African countries?

Elvis Huffard: I think first of all it would be a good idea for them to search out their own hearts and be aware of their own attitudes toward the black man. The black man is in control in these west African countires as he ought to be and if one would have the pricking of conscience or feeling of ill at ease and being where this is being done, it would be better for him not to consider going to these African countries. If he doesn't know what his attitude is, he can associate with such people over here and become brothers to them here and then it will be a whole lot easier for them to be brothers to the black African. If we find it repulsive to us to even

think about this, then we disqualify ourselves because really I don't think we can do the good that we need to do until we look upon these people as full potential of being brothers in Christ and sons of God, accept God as the father of all people. If we can do this, we can go with an optimistic view toward the black African and can see him in a way that he deserves the gospel of Jesus Christ and we can enjoy going to them. I constantly thank God for the opportunities that I have had in preaching the gospel to people in Sierre Leon and Nigeria.

Evertt Huffard: Thank you very much for this record on the history of the work of the church in Sierre Leon as well as in Nigeria and for the contribution that you have made to the Living History of Missions at Harding College. This is November 27, 1970, and at the present time Elvis Huffard is the preacher for the Church of Christ in Sheffield, Alabama.