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Chris Flanders

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# Interview: Wendell Broom

*By Chris Flanders*

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Many know Wendell Broom as a senior missions statesman among Churches of Christ. Indeed, few parallel and surely none exceed his influence in motivating and training cross-cultural missionaries in Churches of Christ over the past fifty years. This article is an edited and condensed portion of a longer interview with Broom, now eighty-four years old, conducted in April 2007. Chris Flanders, assistant professor of missions at Abilene Christian University (ACU) and a former Broom student, talks with Wendell about his own personal pilgrimage, foreign missions in Churches of Christ during the past half-century, and what he is hopeful for as he looks to the future.

*CF: I'm interested to know, Wendell, what sparked your passion for missions?*

WB: Well, the foundational core begins with what I have now realized—a plot on the part of my mother. She plotted for twenty years to move me and motivate me into ministry. The story is too long to go into the details, but it included things like—I don't know what they call it now. Back in those days they called it "expression lessons." And she sent me with a quarter a week to pay the woman that taught them, and she taught me how to memorize and recite poems and stories. I figured, "Well, you know, every seven-year-old kid loves this, I guess." And I didn't realize until I was fifty years old what she was really shooting for. She dropped these little tidbits into my life at strategic points that moved me into deciding to preach.

Betty and I, on the strength of a missions study report...decided that between supper at the cafeteria and prayer meeting at the University Church of Christ (in Abilene), which was about a forty-five minute window, we would invite in visiting mis-

sionaries and listen to what they had to say. I found out that in 1938 there were only three full-time men in Churches of Christ working north of Washington, DC, to the Canadian border. Three men, and that included Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Betty and I talked about it and decided that's where we wanted to go. It was domestic missions of the highest kind. Well, in Wilmington, Delaware, and in Philadelphia, I did pulpit work and leadership for ten years. We felt the hand of God working in our lives. And then an invitation came from a very dear friend of ours who was a pioneer in Nigeria. And he wrote, "Wendell, we've got more over here than we can handle, and we've got to have help. I want you to come." It's a long story, but we went and stayed five years. If we changed Africa as much as Africa changed us, we both had good ministries.

We came back for five more years of pulpit work to kind of recover from Africa. And we ended up helping with a summer school that Harding College had for missionary training. George Gurganus was the leader, and beginning in 1963 I helped him with that, which became Summer Seminar in Missions. Then we moved to Abilene in the summer of 1968. Out of my family training, the knowledge and the love of Jesus, my training at Freed-Hardeman and ACU, and my ten years of preaching experience in the missions field, I ripened for the call to Nigeria. And from then on, Africa has been a dominant power in our lives. We were on the ACU campus living in Abilene, but the shadow of Africa completely dominated our hopes and dreams.

*CF: You mentioned the Wednesday night "Missions Class." I've heard it referenced many times as people talk about their formative missions awareness and ultimate commitment to missions. It's a story*

*that I think has been forgotten. Would you talk more about that?*

WB: It was very simple. Dr. Shug, a brilliant language teacher at ACU... published a book called *On the Mission Field*. Dr. Shug was probably the guiding light involved in those Wednesday evening times and they were totally easy to organize. Anybody hearing that someone they knew who had been on the missions field would say, "You know, he's coming through here next week. We ought to get him to talk to us." We heard Otis Gatewood and a whole bunch of other missionaries... we talked to Otis Gatewood when we were students and he was forming the team that was going to Germany.

*CF: What year would that have been?*

WB: 1943, two years before World War II was over.

*CF: And he was already thinking about the team?*

WB: He was planning a team to go in as soon as the war was over. And he did, with a number of other wonderful people. At this point, I don't know why we decided not to go with that team. I really don't remember why. Well, probably the deciding factor was a man who now lives in Conway, Arkansas: J. Harold Thomas had been preaching in New England for three or four years and he was the one that said, "Only three preachers north of Washington, DC..." He was living way up in Maine—cold and hard. He pioneered New England, and then eventually became the president of the Christian college we started in Villanova, Pennsylvania. Harold started that school and was president for a number of years. Powerful speaker, deeply scholarly. One of the books he wrote was a historical novel on the son of Isaiah the prophet—totally fiction, but historical fiction.

*CF: I'll bet such historical biblical fiction was relatively uncommon back in those days.*

WB: It was, yeah it was. Harold Thomas shaped our lives professionally, mission-wise, personally. He is blind now and barely hanging on to life, but

he was a very powerful, formative force for us. And we learned a whole lot from him. Hearing about the needs, we decided to go to the Northeast. We are very deeply indebted to him in many ways.

*CF: He just passed through Abilene and spoke one single time?*

WB: Yeah, he came from Bangor, Maine, passing through one time, and that planted a seed that never did stop growing.

*CF: You have been involved in both domestic and foreign missions for a span of over fifty years, right?*

WB: Sixty-two years. We went into full-time work in 1945. Betty and I will celebrate our sixty-second anniversary in June, and our marriage and my ministry go hand in hand.

*CF: When looking back on those decades of your involvement in domestic and cross-cultural missions in Churches of Christ, what do you see? How would you describe what Churches of Christ have gone through in those sixty years, specifically in terms of our mission awareness and our mission activity?*

WB: Unbelievable transition. Before 1950, J.M. McCaleb went to Japan and Sam Shoemaker and John Sheriff went to Africa. Well, I believe you know Sam Shoemaker. Sam's father packed up his family and went to New York to take a boat to Africa. They went to New York, and didn't have money to buy a ticket, but they went anyway, believing God would open the way, and he did. They got on the boat and left.

Well, there are about a dozen men like him who went to Africa during the 30s and the 40s, and without exception, those men had to farm, they had to raise cattle, they had to make a living any way they could. From the American churches, they received only maybe thirty or forty bucks a month, and made a magnificent beginning considering all the seeds of failure that they faced. They were heroic men. American churches just had no conscience about it. "Hey this weirdo guy is going to Africa. Can we let

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him talk tonight?" They were really treated as neurotics to do such a dumb thing.

In all of our Christian colleges, there was not one course in missions. The closest thing we had to preparation (at ACU) was that hour between supper and prayer meeting. And we learned very much from some great men in an hour. But that was it, which was a reflection of what the churches were thinking about missions.

Well, the one thing that tilted the whole balance was that thousands of Christian young men went all over the world in World War II. And they came back saying, "You know, it's not like it is here out there." And if their faith survived in that war wilderness, they came back with a more enlightened faith. Many of those men came back and became elders, many of them came back and became missionaries and preachers—domestic preachers or cross-cultural. And if I had to put my finger on one thing that made the difference between pre-1950 and post-1950, it would be World War II. Men were forced to look at the reality of what it means for a people to be without Jesus. And they came home and did something about it.

That may seem an oversimplification, but it isn't. It's a powerful turning point in the history of the Church. With that experience, a lot of those GI's came home and grew a little bit and became elders. And they found out that everything that's Bible in the American church is not really "Bible." And...it caused them to rethink the faith and the tradition of the Churches of Christ, and internal change began with that reality, again traceable to the war experience.

*CF: An amazing point. There was this resurgence in missionaries going all over the world and you can trace it in the missionary picture books we used to have. You can see how those got thicker in the late 50s and early 60s. You have been involved in missionary training and education almost since the very beginning. What have you seen there? What changes have you seen since those early days you mentioned, referencing George Gurganus and others?*

WB: I think of the Teachers of Missions Workshop. The first one of those that we held had four men. Only four men. George and I from ACU, and two of the Payton brothers from Sunset School of Preaching. We met at Camp Buckmann.

*CF: Do you remember what year that was?*

WB: It must have been about 1970, maybe 1971. Because I was teaching summer school in 1968 and 1969, went to Fuller Theological Seminary, and came (to ACU) in June of 1970. George had been (at ACU) the year before. And we said, "OK, here we are, now what are we going to do?" And we realized that we needed to knock heads with the other two guys that were teaching at Sunset. "Well what have you tried, what have you done? What worked? What didn't work?" And the Teachers of Missions Workshop began. And of course, that grew slowly, but it grew.

*CF: In those earlier days, is it correct that many did not see the value of missionary training—that the idea was simply learn the Bible, maybe a language or get a translator?*

WB: People didn't understand what we were talking about. And this troubled me very deeply. Of course, George was the senior partner; I was the junior. He had a doctorate; I didn't. And what George and I tried to do was to impress a mono-cultural faculty that there's more than just telling the Bible. We've got to teach these guys what culture is. We've got to teach these guys what cross-cultural ministry is. We've got to equip them. You know, it's like a science curriculum whose science is geology. And they think, "That's it." But no, you've got to have chemistry, chemistry and geology, and physics. We were stretching a very, very young curriculum. Dean (Walter) Adams, God bless him, didn't know what we were talking about, but he listened, and he let us put in courses that we wanted to put in.

George and I constructed a missions curriculum from zero. And the Bible guys put up with it. They didn't understand what we were talking about. But Donald McGavran (we brought him to ACU for

summer school for three years) told us, “You are going to have to demand the right to build your own curriculum.” He said, “If you get into a faculty meeting that votes on new courses of curriculum and you present, ‘We need a course in cultural anthropology.’ ‘Ah, we’ve never had that. Why do we need that? Bible teachers, Bible faculty, hey, we know that we’re Bible men.’ And they won’t understand why, for missions, you’ve got to have something that deals with cross-cultural life to make it last.”

*CF: What message do you have for people in Churches of Christ who are passionate about God’s mission, who are trying to be faithful and listen to God’s missions calling?*

WB: I can’t remember, in the last six months, I guess it was at the Teachers of Missions Workshop, I spoke on “Who is the Enemy?” Well, I was a Bible-belt, Freed-Hardeman product out of a Bible-belt Church of Christ of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, and not many people were preaching about grace. There was a lot of legalism. And I went to Africa out of that Bible-belt C-of-C legal background. Between 1955 and today I have a whole different slant on who the enemy is. We had some association with some Lutherans and some Catholics and some Baptists and different people in life. And out of my Freed-Hardeman background, I felt kind of like a traitor even being friends with those people. That’s not the climate today. I’m glad that our people have a more balanced view of grace, an ecumenical consciousness. I’m very glad for that. But I also see fewer and fewer of our ACU graduates who have a sense of distinctive calling in the work of preaching.

I’m glad we’re out of a lot of that, but I think that somewhere along the way, well, some are apologetic for their Church of Christ background and you get the idea that they’re ashamed of it. I’m not ashamed of it. And I don’t think our students ought to be ashamed of it. And when they go to Thailand or South Africa or Timbuktu, we’ve got a message that denominational people don’t have. And I think we need to know what that message is and I think we need to concentrate and focus on that message. Now that doesn’t mean that we have to hate the Catholics

and Baptists. But it also doesn’t mean that they’re teaching the same thing that we’re teaching.

The one thing that broke open Nigeria to what has happened—well, I don’t know how many churches there are today, in 2000 I got names that suggested there were 3,800. By now, it’s probably 6,000. But the thing that broke open the whole thing was one (Nigerian) policeman in a correspondence course, who heard for the first time in his life these words, “Speak where the Bible speaks. Be silent where the Bible is silent.” Presbyterians didn’t believe or practice that. And he fell in love with it. And the second one that put him aflame was, “In faith, unity. In opinion, liberty. In all things, love.” And they had not learned that from the Catholics or the Presbyterians or anybody else. But here was an idea that they were waiting for. They were sick of the denominational teachings that were going on around them. They saw that it was shallow; they saw it didn’t have the strength for combating the animism that they needed. And he (the policeman) latched on to those phrases along with all the other biblical texts, and boy, he preached it with fire. And when the first American got there, that man and his co-workers had started sixty-five congregations. Now if we lose that edge, if we fail to create that consciousness in our students, then we send them out with no life. They’re not going to be aflame. That’s where I bring it down to. One sentence. We’re not going to set the world on fire if we haven’t got a flame. That would be my answer.

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