

# HARRIS DISCOVERED

## John Pritchard

In 1923 William Platt, a young but already experienced Wesleyan minister (later to be General Secretary of the British and Foreign Bible Society) spent five days in the French colony of Cote d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) on his way from England back to Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin), where he was in the course of setting up a French West Africa District separate from the Lagos District. While at Grand Bassam, then the Ivory Coast's principal port, he learned from several French residents that there were large numbers of Christians in villages all along the lagoons and inland who were building churches but were not connected with any Missionary Society. Benjamin Dickson, the minister of the Gold Coast District who was stationed in Grand Bassam, apparently knew nothing of them. Platt lost no time in reporting to the WMMS officers, with the ambitious suggestion that the Ivory Coast be included in his FWA District. Although they were reticent because of financial shortfalls, they authorized him to explore the possibility further and he returned in April 1924.

On the evening of Easter Sunday, a full day in Bassam after an exhausting twelve day trek, he sat down to write home to his parents, doubtless by the light of a Tilley lamp. He would shortly be compiling his official report, but this letter is his first, excited account of his experiences.

Grand Bassam  
20/4/24

My dear Mother and Father,

You see I am still on the Ivory Coast and have been here now nearly 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  weeks. I return to Dahomey on May 1<sup>st</sup> and arrive there May 3<sup>rd</sup>. Hilda gets to Lagos a fortnight later, so I'll have splendid time to put all things in good order. Preparations have already been made, naturally, and I have had the Dining Room and Kiosk painted up but have not told her. She'll be pleasantly surprised when she arrives. There will remain very little to do when I get back, so the 10 or 14 days I'll have to "clean up" before the missus arrives will be easily sufficient.

I got back last night from a twelve days "trek". I never had such crowds in my life. We started along the lagoons to Abidjan which is the future capital of the Colony. Two hundred people came to meet me. The same day went up the railway line to a place called Anyama and there were 200 people on the Rly Station awaiting my arrival. Some of them had walked 10 miles to meet me. I walked 2 miles out to the first village and there must have been 300 or 400 people in the Church there. I had lunch and then started off on a 10 mile walk over hill and dale through the most thickly wooded country I have ever seen. There was a good road - good enough for walking - cut through, but for miles the bush was 12 or 15 yards' high. Great, huge trees. Here (after outstripping all my carriers and native Pasteur in the walk!) I found a village (Akoupé) almost all protestants - 600 or

more in a good church. The R.C. priest has persecuted them in his periodic visits, but they've stuck tight. Returning the following day, after being up till midnight talking various "palavers", I went to a village where 400 people awaited me.

Returning to Abidjan I went a two hours run in a "Ford" and got to Dabou and there slept the night. Around Dabou are dozens of villages, every one with its tiny Roman church and its large Protestant church. I visited literally about 20 or more [- ? -] some of them with excellent concrete churches seating 500 people and congregations varying from 400 to 1000. Village after village flocked in to ask me, please to visit them. They had no teaching. Many of them are wholly illiterate, no Hymn Books, no Bible, no printed word at all. All they do is done by memory. All their hymns are learned by heart. Many of them have not seen a paid agent of the mission or a pastor at all - and never a white protestant missionary. They are the result of the work of the "Prophet" Harris in 1912-13 and have patiently awaited until now for someone to teach them. Some of them have taken the name Wesleyans. Some call themselves "Harris" churches, some take the name of a local man who leads them and is a bit more intelligent than the great mass of the people. In almost all these churches there is not a man who can read or write. The Government has been hostile because very often what Hymns they know they had learned in Fanti or English (which they sing like gramophones without understanding). The Catholics have done their best by persuasion, and then by force to make them close up or become catholic. They have steadily increased and now there are literally thousands - 10000, I should say with Churches either built or in building - solid churches which have cost anything from £300 to £1000 in tiles, concrete and brick, awaiting a teacher. I had finally to tear myself away - after 4 days. Villages were coming in pleading with me to visit them! I've never seen anything like it.

As the result of the work of the "Prophet" who preached, straightforwardly, for them to burn their fetishes and follow God who abhorred fetish, these people have stood since 1913 till now amid cruel persecution, (prison and church burning were common) awaiting a leader.

After Dabou I did the further lagoons and found a similar situation. Away from Friday till Tuesday night and only had 9 hours in bed! Canoe, canoe, canoe, sleeping on a camp chair. As happy and as fit as a fiddle tho' once or twice well soaked in the rain - Travelling in borrowed shoes - my sole came off !!!

I have just returned from all this! - last night, and never felt better in my life. The open air and exercise have done me good after 6 months office work in Dahomey. You can understand my feelings today!

How to tackle this job! I have mapped out a programme for immediate undertaking of this awaiting mass. For the whole Colony they had one native Pasteur (who had never seen half the villages) and 6 catechists among literally

scores of villages and over hundreds of miles of territory. Many of these latter were forbidden by the Government to visit the stations.

We shall next month draft from Dahomey one European, 2 native ministers and 10 agents immediately to do something towards lifting the mass of ignorance which is in these “churches”. I should think it’s unparalleled. The Roman Church with 20 missionaries in these towns are not nearly numerically as strong as we are.

This morning I preached here at Bassam. This place is a port with no native population, or very little, and a very cosmopolitan population. This makes it very difficult to work. There are many Catholics, coming from French colonies in other parts, but we had nearly 300 there this morning. It was Easter Sunday and the churches was decorated with flowers and palm leaves. It’s a very nice church and it was quite full. I took as my text John 20.19-23. The Resurrection Message of Xt when he came into the room to the Twelve who were there “for fear of the Jews” - Peace be unto you” then the Purpose of the message, “As my Father sends me - I send you”. Then the organisation and the function of the church.

I tried to bring out the two points

(i) That when we are most discouraged then is the moment Xt steps in. Eg. The Ivory Coast persecutions and the Resurrection.

(ii) That men who fight against God always lose, e.g. The Resurrection, the Reformation and Methodism in England in Wesley’s day - then last Ivory Coast persecution of Xt has not killed Him. He’s risen again.

Tonight, we had a good service when one of our agents preached in French (the one I sent from Dahomey in October) on “Why seek ye the living among the dead” he had a solo later and a very good feeling in the service.

In all this country and in scores of villages, houses and compounds I have visited I have not found one fetish. “Prophet” Harris a Kruman from Liberia converted in Lagos changed, under God, all this in the length of a few weeks and the people have never gone back. Whether there is a mission or not these people will never go back. They continue to build churches, illiterate as they are, and plead with our agents to tell them a text to preach from. There are vast possibilities for our work here. If these churches are left they’ll become outwardly Christian and practically heathen. If we enter now, we’re sure of a huge harvest. But the work of teaching, systematically teaching, these crowds will be great.

Fancy, all the Protestant missions neglecting so great an opportunity for 10 years - and us so near - even our mission on the ground. However now we hope to do something. It’s a great privilege and my constant prayer is that God will help us help them. Even north Dahomey does not provide a greater field than here. The crowds there are very similar, but through our training all can read their Bible. The locality there, however, is smaller - here it is over 100 miles across - and

perhaps the same wide. The people give and we do not need money. The chief need will be then - missionaries from Home. We'll do our best to put it before the Committee, then we'll see what they'll do.

Tomorrow morning I get off about 7 am for a canoe trip of 3 or 4 hours to visit another village close to here, where there are hundreds of protestants.

On Wednesday, we go off till Saturday to visit the Appollonian country around Assinie and Aboisso. I get back next Saturday all being well and sail for Dahomey 4 days later. Lethel or Wood will come here immediately.

Talk about a big job !!! I prayed for it and you two dear ones consecrated yourselves and your [- ? -] offspring to it !!! Bigger even than Horwich U.D.C. However it's to you two - your lives and love, that these thousands whose constant saying to me was "We had no one to open our eyes and give us light" will now be cared for. So even though your Headquarters are 15 Welbourne Grove, your outposts are in West Africa. God is good.

Now, cheerio. I shall not over do it. I wish you could see me now. I am perfectly fit and have a tanned skin with the fresh air. The job of visiting administrators and paving the way for opening up and organising is now nearly finished. More than half is done and then in come our troop of teachers who begin the really hard work. I'll be in Dahomey then, but shall be all the better able to organise and plan because of this tour.

My birthday will be spent on the boat to Dahomey where I arrive on May 3. I shall probably write out my report en route. I have not yet got my last mail which must have been awaiting a boat here for 10 days at Cotonou. Hope you are very fit. Hope to get my mail in a day or so.

All love, as ever Will x x x

Platt's parents naturally kept the letter, and Platt gave me a photocopy when I recorded an interview with him for Radio Côte d'Ivoire fifty years later.

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