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A MOVE TO THE ARDECHE

We had a young and enthusiastic team full of faith and hope for France and the nations. After each summer outreach a few would be called by the Lord to join us. The numbers in the team were quickly outgrowing the two flats and villa we had acquired in Sorgues. We began to seek the Lord for further direction.

One day we found an unexpected letter in the post. It was from Sylviane's old boss in The European Mission Association - TEMA. He had heard about an old house that had been left to La Mission Biblique en Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast Mission). The house was very run down and being renovated by the Mission to be used as a guesthouse for their retired missionaries. It was situated in the town of Bourg St Andéol in the beautiful Ardèche region which is famous for its gorges which attract thousands of would-be canoeists.

"As you have an interest in outward-bound work I wondered whether you might be able to use this house in the summer months,"

he wrote.

As I read those words there was an inner conviction that this was important. Unfortunately we then lost the letter and had to search frantically until we at last found it again! We were then able to ring the house in the Ardèche and arrange a rendezvous to discuss the possibility of using the house as an activities base for the summer.

We arrived at the house after long delays in traffic jams due to bad weather and road accidents. The house was nestled at the angle of a dark and narrow street named after the Protestant, Olivier de Serres. The entrance was in very bad repair but we were welcomed by a delightful French couple into the comfortable apartment they had renovated.

As we sat talking they explained a little about the house. It was what the French call a 'hôtel particulier' (private hotel) and was built by the De Bonot family in the 16th Century to celebrate their daughter's marriage. A very ornate iron balustrade and a sculpted plaster chimney were actually classed officially as 'historic monuments' which complicated the renovation procedure.

They explained how the Mission Biblique had inherited the property from a widow named Mme Magendie. It was a tragic tale. The Magendie family had acquired the building and lived there under the German occupation in the 2nd World War. Many memorial plaques around the town bear witness to the number of French men killed by the Gestapo during this time. For some reason M Magendie was wanted by the Gestapo (some say it was because he was Jewish). They eventually caught him, beat him and finally executed him by removing his head. The savagery of this experience had a devastating effect on Mme Magendie and brought her to depression and eccentricity for

the rest of her days. Like some modern day Mrs Haversham (from Dickens *'Great Expectations'*) she hid herself away as a recluse while the old house fell into decay and ruin around her. The stray cats found a refuge in the house and the thick walls seemed to soak up the sadness of a lonely lady's life ruined by tragedy.

In her last days she was visited by a friendly Protestant pastor. She asked him if he knew of a mission to whom she could leave her home. It was this pastor who mentioned the Ivory Coast Mission which at the time was directed by the famous evangelical statesman, Jacques Blocher. It was his vision to renovate the house under the name of 'La Fondation Magendie' and use it as a rest home for retired missionaries. Unfortunately, after a good beginning, the money had run out for the renovation work and many questions were being asked as to the future of the vision.

On hearing his story my mind went back to my own studies on the Rhone Valley area and more specifically to the origins of the town, Bourg St Andéol. It seems that this area had been very much on God's heart and that the Holy Spirit led the early church to target this region.

Jesus had stood atop a mountain in Galilee and, full of faith and authority, had given his rag tag disciples the vision and the mission to *'make disciples of all nations'*. One of the more famous of these disciples was the apostle John who began to train a number of men, most notably Polycarp, who became Bishop of Smyrne in Turkey (today's Izmir). Polycarp, in his turn, made disciples of a number of men including a young man named Andéol. Andéol along with several others was sent out on pioneer missionary work into the pagan land of the Rhone Valley.

The church historian, Eusebius, speaks of the 'Martyrs of Lyons', especially of the young slave girl, Blandine, killed in the arenas of Lyons and the miraculous healings, testimony and courage of the early Christians. Something very violent and very evil resisted the gospel in this area. Andéol travelled the Ardèche (then known as the Vivarais) with the same message of hope and salvation in Christ. He too met with a violent end when, like the Gestapo in a future age, the Roman legion beheaded him. From the time of John the Baptist whose head was set before Salome on a platter it seems that the prophetic voice and presence has brought forth much opposition

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A statue to Andéol in the Catholic Church of the town shows him with a sword through his head. Andéol's tomb can still be seen in this same church which became a place of pilgrimage for many. As I sat listening to the various histories of the house, I wondered if we too might find ourselves taking up the pilgrims' baton to plug into our own prophetic role in the divine strategy for France.

Later visits around Bourg St Andéol also brought some startling revelations. A major archaeological find, and one of the few sites in Europe, was the discovery of a gigantic wall sculpture to the God, Mithra. Sandwiched between two natural springs, known places for pagan sacrifices, stands a huge mural depicting the sun god, Mithra, astride a bull. This pagan Persian deity made major inroads into Europe and its presence confirmed the strategic nature of the town as a kind of spiritual crossroads.

The town was also home to a magnificent Catholic lady named Marie Rivier who opened up many Christian schools and was known to have said,

"If I can't preach Christ, I'd sooner die!"

A huge Catholic convent now does honour to her memory. Numerous statues depicting a so-called Mary crown the high places around Bourg St Andéol challenged only by other statues in honour of Diana, goddess of the moon and the hunt.

It was in the midst of all this that a house, in much need of repair, stood. The young couple invited us for lunch and they explained how they would have liked to see an evangelical church established in the town. They had begun a few tentative meetings in the house. As we ate I became aware of my need to go to the loo so I quickly got up and found my way to the toilet. As I stood there finding relief God clearly spoke into my spirit.

"You will go to the toilet here often!"

I'm not sure if my theology or view of God allowed Him to make such a dramatic statement in such a context. Having considered the lofty heights of sainthood, Persian deities and prophetic persecution, it seemed rather too mundane to receive my own prophetic direction in the loo! However, there was no mistaking the authoritative heavenly tone which my inner ear picked up.

"You will go here often! You will go here often!"

seemed to have been planted deep within me.

I returned to my seat and we looked at possibilities for using the house in the summer. We then took our leave.

On the way back in the car I shared with Sylviane what I felt the Lord had said to me.

"Do you think the Lord would have us live in that house?"

I said.

"We'll see…,"

came the wise reply.

Over the following months we had several meetings with the directors of the Ivory Coast Mission to discuss possible involvement and partnership. We were in our own 'pioneer' stage and had no resources available to put into the house. They were unable to carry on financing the restoration of the building which became empty except

for a local live-in caretaker. The house was hit by ferocious hailstorms and the lack of renovation and emptiness gave it quite an inhospitable atmosphere as time went on.

Over a year and a half went by and I had given up on my move to the Ardèche. The Ivory Coast Mission was willing for us to use the house but we could not find a way of putting this into practice

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We needed to find a venue for a regional Horizons leaders meeting and I asked the Ivory Coast Mission if we could use the house. They agreed. We spent over two weeks in the house in discussion and prayer which seemed to give us a faith and boldness to take possession of 'our inheritance'.

At the end of the conference I felt a number of our team should stay on in the house and start getting it ready as a base. In the meantime I began to move all our team property from the flats and villa to Bourg St Andéol. I also gave in our notice on the villa and apartments in Les Griffons.

From this place of faith, and with 90% of our possessions already installed in the house, I phoned up the mission and explained to them my conviction that we should use the house and how we had already begun to move in!

"Are you happy with this arrangement?"

I asked.

"Yes, okay,"

came the answer.

Nothing signed. No official papers, etc. but we now had the use of our own centre! It amazes me to see how our progress in France has often hung on such slender threads. I sometimes wonder what I would have done if the mission had said, "Non!" rather than "Oui!".

Within three weeks we had over fifteen folk working full-time in the Horizons family. A number of these folk went on to pioneer works in unreached countries of North and West Africa. Folk were sleeping in every nook and cranny that the house had to offer. It was decided that the renovated flat, which had belonged to the couple we first visited, should be used by myself, Sylviane and our little boy, David. And yes, I did use the toilet there often! In fact the flat became our home for the next five years while we strengthened the growth and development of our missions base. The 'prophetic pee!', as I irreverently remembered it, had indeed tied us into God's purposes for France and many other nations.

With regard to other nations I had an interesting encounter as we were leaving our villa in Sorgues. Everything had been packed and we were having a last meal of bread and cheese in the garden under the shade of our fig tree. Suddenly, a car pulled up with

M Claude Moser, the then director of the Porte Ouverte mission, accompanied by a brother from the Central African Republic, Nicholas Ngarrasso. This brother was President of a very large group (La Co-opération Evangélique) of over 500 churches. We were still celebrating the birth of our first son, David, and our African brother was pleased to announce the birth of his daughter. We were able to give him a big white fluffy toy dog for his daughter. He then proceeded to pray for us and bless us with a booming, enthusiastic African voice full of power and authority. And so a Central African blessing sent us forth to our new home in the Ardèche. Little did I know how significant that chance meeting would prove to be!

We ran our first summer outreach from the centre which became packed with over 40 students from British Universities. Apart from language and culture sessions, they would spend their evenings out on evangelistic efforts in the local flats of Bourg. The empty building was suddenly full of life - Jesus' life! I think this must have been quite a shock for the local inhabitants who must have wondered what had hit them!

When we moved into the house we inherited a resident caretaker. He was a strange, friendly character. He seemed to have an unending supply of visits from all sorts of hippie types who were either in the town or passing through. I could not help but admire his zeal in receiving such folk so regularly.

My wife likes to look after gardens and, like most green spaces in the South of France, you need to be very faithful with the watering of plants. She noticed a whole crop of quite exotic-looking plants growing in the back garden but wilting under the heat. She made it her duty to faithfully water them at sundown each evening, and they began to thrive.

I came back early from the evangelism one evening and decided that I would investigate more closely these exotic plants as they had some familiar shaped leaves that I had seen printed on T-shirts in my student days. I inspected dozens of robust plants growing, struggling to recall what was written on those student T-shirts. Were they environmentalists defending some rare species? Did the leaves have some medicinal qualities? Then it hit me! The words 'Legalise Cannabis' floated into my mind as my memory brought back the words framing the famous green-leafed T-shirts!

"Oh no!" I sighed. "Our friendly, ministry to the hippies, caretaker is growing his own marijuana!"

I lit a few dry leaves which had fallen from the main plants and was immediately greeted with the telltale smell of cannabis. I'm sure the mission strategy of such a conservative board as the Ivory Coast Mission did not include the winning of hippies via free cannabis distribution! The Jamaican singer, Bob Marley, had championed the Rastafarian faith, where members get high on cannabis as a form of worship. I was not yet ready (and trust I never will be!) to trade in the Holy Spirit for cannabis.

I quickly sought out the caretaker and challenged him concerning his plants.

“Oh, it’s quite alright,” he said. “Everyone in France is allowed to grow cannabis in their garden. You don’t understand because you are English.”

“Okay,” I replied. “Let’s sort out this cultural difference by getting a short explanation from the local police.”

“Well,” he responded, less sure this time. “I may be mistaken.”

He certainly was mistaken! He allowed us to get rid of all the plants – we burnt them trying not to inhale too much!

There then followed a long struggle as our missionary community and the caretaker’s lifestyle didn’t always match. He was a nice guy at heart but in the end our roads separated and he ended up living in a mobile home in the next village.

We established an understanding with the Ivory Coast Mission that we would continue to renovate the house in exchange for a free rent. They agreed and we set to work. Scraping, building, plastering, painting – the years (or sentence!) of centre management had begun!

God called a wonderful guy called Chris to work with us at this time. He was the world’s best handyman and had a real gift of helps. He worked wonders on the centre with a shoestring budget. He eventually married a Canadian girl in the team, Thérèse, who had a heart for the unreached villages of the Ardèche. In fact marriage seemed to be the major ministry of the centre as many of the pioneer singles of Horizons met their life partners.

The early monastic orders set up a principle called ‘laborare orare’ – work is worship. This principle formed the basis of our team life together as we worked on renovating the house while maintaining much prayer for the nations and worship.

Our outreach was soon bearing fruit in the town and we began a small bible study group with our contacts. In spite of the opposition and trials which hit every pioneer work we managed to start a small church.

One of our first converts was a former medium and fortune-teller. After a life in the darkness, occult and rejection, she was set free by the love of Christ and found light and happiness. We were able to baptise her in an open-air service in the town centre.

As the years passed the church needed to find its own local identity and outgrew the mission. It now has its own building and is pastored by Paul Pemsing. I remember speaking to Paul in his early days with Horizons and telling him,

“This town deserves a church.”

This word touched his heart and after his formal and on-the-job training, he was able to take on the leadership. He reminded me of this story when I was preaching in the church recently.

We were seeing spiritual fruit but my own natural fruit was increasing and our second son, Marc, was born in Pierrelatte Hospital on the other side of the Rhone River.

The early days also included a visit to our team in America. I had the fleshly idea that I would be able to raise finance for our ministry there but ended up coming home poorer than when I arrived!

Despite the local breakthroughs my heart was still beating for the nations. Psalm 2 v 8 says,

"Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance…"

And I was still asking! Bourg St Andéol became a launch pad for a number of key ministries into the French-speaking world.