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Making Bible Translation a Core Mission of the Church

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The church upholds the Bible as its ultimate source of authority, but Bible translation and revision, as well as the whole Bible publication process, are largely controlled by other bodies. In this article, I introduce an emerging paradigm by which the church is empowered to take full ownership of Bible translation and revision, without infringing on existing copyrights. This new translation approach, called Church-Centric Bible Translation (CCBT), is gaining momentum predominantly among rather small ethno-linguistic communities in Africa, Asia and the Pacific region.

Before introducing the CCBT approach, I will review historic and current approaches to Bible translation and argue that this activity is a crucial task for the church and should not be left to others.

Rethinking the process of Bible translation is imperative and prudent in light of the ever-declining Western workforce involved in global missions. Accordingly, I hope to challenge the worldwide church to adopt and take ownership of Bible translation as part of its indispensable core mission.

I. History of Bible Translation

The biblical canon represents a col-

lection of writings which, beginning in the third century, came to be defined as an unchangeable and binding document. It was established in 350 AD as the specially inspired basis and guideline for the fellowship of believers, the church.

Although different churches have come to accept somewhat divergent canons over the course of time, all Christian churches acknowledge the Bible as their foundation for faith and belief. From the early days, interpretation and exegesis of the Scriptures received heavy emphasis, since the Bible has consistently been viewed as God's direction for life. God entrusted the Bible to the church and mandated the church to use it, live by it and assume full responsibility for it. Thus, Bible translation is a task that the church needs to reclaim. All spiritual gifts necessary for this task have been given to and are present in the church.

Translation of the Scriptures has a long history. The first translations of the Torah were made into Aramaic and later into Greek, Latin and Gothic. During the Renaissance and the Reformation, the Bible was translated into vernacular tongues. Our focus in this article, however, is the nineteenth century, when the beginning of modern missions featured people

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like William Carey, who translated the Bible into a number of languages spoken in India, or Cornelius Van Alen Van Dyck who translated the Bible into Arabic. The purpose of these translations was to evangelize more effectively and to make biblical content clear to believers.

During the nineteenth century, the first Bible societies were founded, including the British and Foreign Bible Society (founded in 1804), the Bible Society of India (1811) and the Bible Society of Australia (1817). Interest in overseas mission and evangelism rose sharply. Later mission societies such as OMF International (founded in 1865) and SIM (1893) also emphasized Bible translation.

In 1942, Wycliffe Bible Translators, the best-known of such endeavours, was founded by William Cameron Townsend. Years earlier, Townsend had travelled to Guatemala to sell Spanish bibles, but he had little success, because most people where he went did not understand Spanish. A specific incident triggered Townsend's interest in Bible translation: he met a man who questioned God's sovereignty because, the man said, God was unable to speak the man's native tongue.

Townsend started offering summer linguistic training during the 1930s, which led to the founding of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). During these training camps, Townsend taught principles of how to analyse a language, thus laying a good foundation with regard to how to produce a clear, natural and acceptable Bible translation.

Wycliffe Bible Translators sought initially to recruit additional missionaries and to serve as a link between the mission field and home churches.

During its first years, the missionaries served mainly in Latin America. The first Wycliffe-supported Bible translation was completed in 1951; today, the number of full Bible translations is approaching 700, with an additional 1,550 New Testament translations, plus translation of selected passages and stories into 1,150 more languages.

These impressive figures must be balanced against the number of living languages worldwide, which is a moving target. Living languages can die if they are very small. On the other hand, one language can become split into two or more, if the various dialects of that language turn out to be too diverse for one translation to serve all of them well. In these cases, separate translations are of course warranted.

SIL International is keeping track of all these developments in Bible translation, and updates are published regularly. As of October 2019, SIL indicated that there were about 7,353 living languages worldwide, including sign languages, and the Wycliffe Global Alliance estimated that '171 million people, speaking 2,115 languages, still need translation work to begin.'¹

For decades, Bible translation has been viewed as an expert preserve, an activity reserved only for highly trained specialists. Fastidious production standards have been maintained. Thorough training in the various fields of linguistics—phonetics and phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse analysis, to name a few—has therefore been considered

¹ "2019 Bible Translation Statistics", www.wycliffe.net/en/statistics.

essential. Other subjects such as acquisition of practical approaches to language learning, ethnology, or special information technology skills have contributed further to making the practice of Bible translation highly scientific in nature.

For a long time, ethno-linguistic communities have not had the capacity to do Bible translation themselves, even if they wished to. Therefore, a sound and systematic approach by Western Christians was justified. However, much has changed over recent years. Mass media and communication platforms now enable dramatic inroads into previously isolated people groups. Options and facilities for higher training have increased in many countries. And the picture in Bible translation is more diverse than ever before, with an increasing number of stakeholders coming from the growing churches of the global south and east.

II. The Wake-Up Call

In 1999, Wycliffe International and SIL International jointly hosted their tri-annual conference. (Conference modalities have changed since then.) Wycliffe International is the predecessor of today's Wycliffe Global Alliance, which describes itself as composed of more than a hundred organizations involved in Bible translation movements and language communities worldwide.

During this conference, the delegates set the direction for a major course change regarding how to approach the remaining Bible translation task. Why did they do this? John Watters, executive director of Wycliffe International at that time, presented the delegates with new figures and a

new perspective, adding a whole new dimension to the issue of the remaining Bible translation need. Watters related the number of Bible-less languages to factors like the active number of expatriate translation advisors, taking growth and attrition rates into account. He also looked at the average number of years required to successfully finish a translation project.

The result he presented was both a shock and a wake-up call for Wycliffe and SIL, leading them to adopt a plan called Vision 2025. This plan contained an extremely ambitious goal, far too large to accomplish by that date or merely by human means. Wycliffe USA summarizes the main conference outcome as follows:

In 1999, our leaders realized that at the speed we were going, it would be at least 2150 before a Bible translation could be started for every language that needed one. As they thought about the people perishing around the world every day without receiving the Good News of the gospel, they felt God calling them to adopt a new goal for accomplishing this mission. Our leaders committed to do everything we could to see a Bible translation program in progress in every language still needing one by 2025.²

The delegates developed and adopted Vision 2025 without really knowing where they were going, and without answers to the many emerging and burning questions it raised.

The Vision 2025 statement reads, 'Motivated by the pressing need for all peoples to have access to the Word of

² 'The History of Wycliffe', <https://www.wycliffe.org/about>.

God in a language that speaks to their hearts, and reaffirming our historic values and our trust in God to accomplish the impossible, we embrace the vision that by the year 2025 a Bible translation project will be in progress for every people group that needs it.’³

The adoption of Vision 2025 led to intensified prayer, greater urgency and a focus on training nationals. The results were impressive. The number of nationals with a formal degree in translation studies has increased significantly. The output of Scriptures has never in history been higher, especially in minority languages. The urgency to make the word of God known to everyone in a language he or she understands best has contributed to the formation of new alliances such as ETEN (Every Tribe, Every Nation). Many new translation organizations have come into being, especially in South America, Africa and Asia. Entities like Wycliffe Associates, which historically supported Bible translation through construction work and technical support services, decided to become directly involved in Bible translation. In October 2019, Wycliffe Associates published a set of free and open-licensed Bible translation tools for the global church to support oral and written translation (see <https://bibletranslationtools.org/>). Another organization, called unfoldingWord, has developed translationStudio, an open-source platform to make Bible translation accessible to the global church. TranslationCore, another free tool, has been developed for checking translations.

As a result of these efforts, the number of languages needing translation has been reduced significantly. As noted above, however, latest counts still indicate that the figure is over two thousand.

III. Grappling with ‘Translation Need’

‘And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come’ (Mk 13:10, NIV). This is a key verse in the realm of Bible translation activity, since people need to clearly understand the Gospel before they can decide how to respond to it. The translation task was defined starting from that premise, so efforts were made early to catalogue the world’s languages.

SIL International had a natural interest in doing this, having been Wycliffe’s main partner organization since its foundation. As the leading organization in language research and documentation, SIL has published since 1951 the *Ethnologue*, a reference publication on the world’s living languages. The *Ethnologue* is published periodically in print and is progressively being updated online.

The goal in Bible translation is to close the gap between finished and needed translations. For many years, the gap exceeded three thousand languages out of a fluctuating total of between 6,800 and 7,100 languages. During the 1980s, Scripture output figures started to pick up, but the number of needed translations did not come down significantly, for several reasons. As language survey and assessment progressed, new languages were discovered or identified. More sophisticated survey tech-

³ ‘Vision 2025’, Wycliffe Global Alliance website, <http://www.wycliffe.net/about-us/more?id=7988>.

niques and tools evolved in the wake of improvements in language survey methods. Languages and their settings were sometimes re-evaluated, leading to more differentiated language assessments that in turn resulted in additional translation needs.

Furthermore, the advancement of socio-linguistics relativized the perception that only linguistic factors constitute a translation need. Experts concluded that for certain subsets of language groups, separate translations were warranted because of different religious beliefs from those of the majority, or because of cultural or historical allegiances to other groups in the area. It became evident in many cases that a single translation would not suitably serve a whole people group.

The number of languages needing translation eventually decreased. The Wycliffe Global Alliance, which has generated and published Scripture access statistics for many years, indicated in 2017 that the number had dropped to around 1,860—only to increase by about three hundred in 2018, because sign-language needs were now included. This change reinforces the degree to which translation need has been a moving target.

Since Vision 2025 was adopted twenty years ago, many (including myself) have been riveted by ‘remaining translation need’, because a deadline had been defined: a Bible translation project was to be started in every language that needed it by 2025. The so-called low-hanging fruit was harvested first: translations into large languages with many speakers and often well-established churches, providing motivated and well-trained translators. Making headway has become harder now that the remaining

translation needs are located in ‘difficult’ countries with no or only small churches.

On a positive note, one could say that the 171 million people whose languages have no current or completed Bible translation work represent just over 2 percent of the world population, and that almost 98 percent of the world population has access to the Gospel, at least theoretically. One could say that we are almost there, but we know that Jesus cares even for the last percent (Mt 18:12).

We also know that the Holy Spirit uses different parts of Scripture to draw people to Christ: it could be a gospel, a psalm, Genesis or Isaiah. Translating all or most of the Bible is desirable, I would think, because God speaks through all his words. I even remember reading an account of a man for whom the genealogical passage in Mt 1:2–16 was instrumental in enabling him to trust the Bible, because the record of who fathered whom was the key evidence for him. God is sovereign and can work through many or few passages of Scripture, just as he likes. Therefore, the question of how much of the Bible should be translated into a given language cannot be answered in general. Whether we provide a Bible, mini-Bible, New Testament, or only Scripture portions is a question I believe the local church must answer.

Although we are still striving to achieve the goal set by Vision 2025, I believe we need to widen our focus to look beyond that year.

SIL has created Progress.Bible, a database and information hub on the status of Bible translation in each living language. It is kept up to date by constantly drawing data from multiple sources, such as Wycliffe organi-

zations from around the world, mission societies, and the United Bible Societies. Progress.Bible welcomes updates on translation projects from anywhere, but information output is graded and limited, partly because of the sensitive nature of some information. Interested individuals can subscribe to monthly 'snapshots', which provide figures on completed translations or numbers of living languages at global and continental levels.

Revision is another growing aspect of translation need. Revisions of existing New Testaments are often done after the Old Testament translation into a language is completed. The idea is to give the church a complete Bible that is current and communicates well. So to invest another two to three years to revamp the New Testament is time well spent.

If a New Testament translation has existed for 25 years, many people, including those behind Progress.Bible, consider that translation to be aging. I do not believe that this threshold can be applied universally, but a translation published in 1995 should be tagged as possibly starting to become outdated in terms of vocabulary and other categories. The compelling question is evident: who will tackle the ongoing task of revising the ever-growing number of New Testaments in the years to come? The only logical answer is the church.

IV. A New Paradigm in Bible Translation

Various approaches to Bible translation have been applied over the past three centuries. The first common paradigm was typified by missionaries like Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, who travelled to India in the early

eighteenth century, learned to speak the Tamil language and translated the NT and parts of the OT into it.

A second paradigm uses speakers of the source tongue (normally a major language in the area, such as Swahili in Africa) as the main translators. They master the target language well and do most or all of the translation. Project coordination and assistance are often provided from outside the target geographic area, involving experts on topics like literacy or Scripture use. Translation quality control comes from consultants separate from the translation team.

This is still the prevailing model, although nationals increasingly fill leadership roles in translation projects. The time investment under paradigm 2 averages about twelve years, but projects have lasted as long as thirty years under difficult circumstances like health or visa issues, lack of suitable staff, or civil unrest. Financially, these projects have normally been covered by donations from a home constituency that cover staff members' needs.

A new, third paradigm is emerging in which local churches take full ownership of Bible translation. This method, which some refer to as church-centric Bible translation or CCBT, began only a few years ago. Tim Jore, author of a white paper titled 'Bible Translation 3.0', described the direction this translation approach is taking:

We are in the midst of a historic shift in Bible translation, as the global Church reclaims her rightful ownership of and authority for the task. As biblical content, training resources, and technology tools are increasingly made available without restriction, the Church

will be able to take advantage of every opportunity for the advancement of Bible translation into every language.

To that end, the ‘unfoldingWord’ project is an end-to-end digital publishing platform that is attempting to facilitate this outcome. It models the concept of an unrestricted ‘commons’ of open-licensed biblical content, translation training resources, and open-source tools that enable the global Church to do whatever is needed to accelerate the task of translating the Bible into every language.

Wycliffe Associates USA is using the paradigm 3 approach to empower local churches for translation. Open collaboration is encouraged, to take advantage of the access provided by our computer age and enable many people to work simultaneously on a Bible translation project.

Under paradigm 3, local churches and church networks take the project lead, and the translation scope is defined according to the needs and desires of the church. This method is cost-effective relative to previous approaches. An NT translation may take only two to four years, and revisions can be done frequently because all printed and audio materials are published under a Creative Commons license, as further explained below.

V. Church-Centric Bible Translation

The main characteristic of CCBT is that a part of the global church takes full control of all necessary aspects of translating the Bible into its own language. Tim Jore’s book on the

topic provides a good overview.⁴ It describes the Gateway Languages Strategy, or the basis for preparing Scriptures published under a Creative Commons license. The Gateway Languages concept has become the centrepiece for multiple entities including Wycliffe Associates, unfoldingWord, and church networks in Asia or Africa to promote and foster Bible translation carried out under the auspices of the local church.

The main characteristics of CCBT are as follows:

- Driven at the grassroots level
- Generally, use of copyright-free Bibles
- Quick use of draft print-outs for feedback
- Many translators in large workshop settings, not few translators investing great amounts of time
- Use of an array of electronic translation helps and tools, such as translation notes, translation questions, a reviewers guide, Greek and Hebrew Bibles, grammars and lexicons⁵

Gateway languages (GLs) are very dominant languages. They gain that status because they are used internationally, as with English, or because very many people across different countries use it as their second language (L2), as with French in Central and West Africa. A GL can be relatively small, like Bislama, the national language of Vanuatu. Only 10,000 people speak Bislama as their L1, but

⁴ Tim Jore, ‘Church-Centric Bible Translation: A Visual Overview’, <https://www.ccbt.bible>.

⁵ See ‘Resources’, <https://www.unfoldingword.org/resources>.

another 200,000 people speak it as a second language. In Vanuatu, 110 different living languages are spoken, which explains why Bislama can be considered a GL.

As Jore explains, ‘The Gateway Languages Strategy provides biblical content that is irrevocably open-licensed so that the entire global Church can use and build on it equally.’ It was originally developed by the non-profit organization Distant Shores Media (now ‘unfoldingWord’). This organization’s stated mission is ‘Equipping the global church with unrestricted biblical resources’.⁶

Wycliffe Associates USA adopted the GL concept several years ago. Worldwide, around 42 GLs have been named, although precisely defining the concept or counting the number of GLs has not been a priority. The important step is for a church in a certain area to define the source language from which a translation into a local vernacular can best be produced. GL translations are the avenues that the local church can use to produce its own Scriptures.

Ownership

The introduction of CCBT is also helping to solve historical problems with regard to who ‘owns’ a Bible translation. Ownership can be defined in legal or moral terms. People groups who do not have the Bible in their mother tongue may be described as the moral owners of an active translation project into their language, because they are the ones who will benefit directly from the project.

On the other hand, legal ownership of a translation project rests, in a sense, with a national church. If one or more expatriates are involved, the national government could be seen as legally owning that project by sponsoring work permits through one of their ministries. Often, translation organizations like Wycliffe or a partner organization control project-related funds. Finally, the resulting product is in most cases legally owned by the respective national Bible Society. Scripture translation can thus be a very complex and complicated legal process.

The question ‘Who owns the Bible?’ can be answered in different ways, but to me the paramount stance is the one the church takes. What is the status of the Bible for the church? Is it simply a book that church activities traditionally revolve around? Does the Bible really belong to the national Bible Society, which sells it and holds the copyright—despite the fact that the lion’s share of resources to produce a new translation came from abroad? Or is the Bible the living word of God, entrusted to the church to be used for evangelism and discipleship, church planting and building people up? These questions could bring very divergent answers from Christians around the world., but the baseline remains true for all: ‘From Apostolic days the church pioneered translation and the uses of mother tongues, vernaculars, and lingua francas in the proclamation and spread of the gospel.’⁷

I believe that community owner-

⁶ See Tim Jore, ‘The Gateway Languages Strategy’, <https://unfoldingword.org/gateway/>.

⁷ Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., *World Christian Database* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2019), 245.

ship is central to achieving the purpose of any Bible translation effort, which is to bring more people to understand and obey the Gospel. When communities own their projects, they are more likely to use the Scriptures after translation and to apply the Bible's teachings.

VI. Getting the Church to Translate the Bible

In many places, the church is eager to become involved in translation. In some cases, however, the church may want to translate but is lacking funds, knowhow or logistics. In other situations, the church uses the Bible in the national language but a local translation would serve the church better.

The Great Commission calls the church to preach the good news everywhere, and unless people clearly understand the message, they are unable to respond to it in a meaningful way. That is why Bible translation is a necessity for the church. For the last twenty years, Western Christians have initiated translations, counted languages and measured progress towards accomplishing Vision 2025, but increasingly they are passing the torch to churches and organizations from the global south and east. They are recognizing that without more training of nationals to take responsibility for their own Bible translations, the vision will not be reached.

It is my hope that the World Evangelical Alliance will officially recognize Bible translation and revision as key tasks of the global church. The WEA could further help by developing a roadmap and a framework for Bible translation activity that is fully controlled by the church. The *World Christian Database* provides a wealth

of global data on both people groups and language to facilitate launching this process.

Guidelines to help national, regional and or local translation steering committees would have to be worked out. Here, much can be gleaned from agencies that have been active in the translation business for a long time. The most important potential innovation at the alliance level would be to set up national translation and information hubs where central questions can be handled. These questions might include whether to offer translation assistance to local groups, when to revise previously translated Scriptures, questions of translation style and format, matters of distribution and access, and training of consultants.

These kinds of questions are too manifold for outside agencies to respond to, but could be handled by national alliances affiliated with the WEA. Guidelines to assist regional and/or local translation steering committees would need to be developed and implemented. WEA bodies on the district and area levels are in the best position to make reasonable and substantiated judgements about translation need because of their insight into the linguistic and socio-linguistic dynamics of the area they live in or near.

It would be a great step forward if national alliances could take on formative responsibilities to coordinate and steer Bible translation activities in their respective countries, with policy and procedural guidance from the international level. Strategizing Bible translation in this way, though desirable, will not be realizable everywhere, as the situations facing the church and the available options for

action vary widely across the globe. But this should not stop the WEA from setting the Bible translation agenda and streamlining procedures as much as possible.

National alliances are also in the best position to keep a healthy balance between supporting needed translations and discouraging tiny dialect groups from producing non-essential translations in cases when Scriptures in a neighbour dialect already serve that group well.

Hundreds of translation projects have been initiated at the local level during the past five years using the CCBT approach. Since very many translations are still needed to fulfil

the goal of Vision 2025, it is high time for the worldwide church to assume formal and practical responsibility for Bible translation, especially because the local church cannot be substituted by any other body. CCBT helps the local church to recognize that Bible translation and revision truly belong to the church, and it encourages the church to assume responsibility for this task in a viable way. This approach has gained significant momentum at the local level but could be further enhanced with support and helpful guidance from national and international levels of the body of Christ.