

AG Missionaries Deliver Mesem Translation to Papua New Guinea

In late January, a song echoed through the wild mountains of Papua New Guinea: “We have the book of God, and when Jesus comes we will go! Hold on to Jesus—hold on to His eternal life!”

The beautiful words were sung in Mesem, one of the 800 languages spoken across Papua New Guinea, an island nation off the coast of Australia. Samanzing, the largest of the nation’s Mesem villages, lies squarely in the heart of a mountainous jungle at an elevation of nearly 5,600 feet.

During World War II, Japanese and Australian war planes roared over these wild mountains, jarring residents who had existed almost entirely untouched by the outside world. The first wheels they saw were those on the war planes.

“Until the war, the lives of many Papua New Guineans had been essentially unchanged for thousands of years,” says Assemblies of God missionary Kathy Vanaria, who along with her husband, Neil, and son, Anthony, recently completed the first translation of the New Testament into Mesem.

Translating the Scriptures into Mesem has been slow, laborious work. Because of a medical condition, Kathy lives in almost constant pain. During some phases of the translation, she worked on her back, her computer propped against her knees. Yet over the years, the Vanarias’ efforts prompted the establishment of 12 schools to help teach the Mesem to read and write in their own language.

At last, despite repeated delays, the Vanarias’ work was completed, and Life Publishers printed 3,500 New Testaments,

enough for every Mesem man, woman and child. Each small blue volume came in a plastic bag with a flap to protect the pages from the rain forest environment.

When the Bibles arrived in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea's capital, another crisis awaited them. Customs refused to release the containers, forcing the date for the Bibles' distribution to be changed eight times. At last, the date for the dedication was set for January 27, 2013.

A sign announcing "God's Talk Has Life" adorned the path to Samanzing when Neil and Kathy returned from the dock with the Bibles in tow.

Once they reached the center of Samanzing, an elaborate ceremony began. People representing five Mesem villages attended, and each group performed traditional dances and brought a special offering. For a full day, they celebrated with pageantry, reverence and joy.

Visitors from across Papua New Guinea and the United States attended the dedication to rejoice with the Mesem people.

Russ Turney, Assemblies of God World Missions (AGWM) regional director for the Asia Pacific, was among those who attended. "The past 20 years was a time of great difficulty for Neil and Kathy," he says. "They could have easily given up and decided the work was too difficult. However, they persevered, and with the help of many friends and the power of the Holy Spirit, they completed the work."

Jerry Jacob, AGWM area director for Pacific Oceania, also made the journey to Samanzing. "I was overwhelmed when I saw Mesem weep as they were given the New Testament for the first time," he says. "This Book will affect them for generations to come!"

Even in their excitement to finally receive the long-awaited New Testaments, the Mesem recognize the dedication as the beginning of their journey, not the end. Now that they have

the Scriptures, they are responsible to share it with others.

Turney is encouraged by the response among the Mesem, but he knows an enormous work remains to be done. "Our few days in Papua New Guinea were filled with joy, but we continue to pray for the more than 500 tribal groups that still wait for the gospel in their languages and for more trained workers to reach and disciple others throughout the nation," he says.

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