

Taking Risks for The Word

Quietly and without fanfare, Bible translators risk their lives to provide unreached tribes and subcultures with God's Word. This is their amazing story.

Panneer Selvam was reading his Tamil-language Bible while riding a bus one day when God suddenly spoke to him: "When you know English well, why are you reading your Tamil Bible?"

"Because it is my mother tongue," Selvam replied.

"Everyone loves to read the Bible in his or her own mother tongue," the voice answered. "You must do something to meet that need."

The encounter prompted him to resign his position as professor of electronics and communications at an engineering college in India and launch Indian Bible Translators (IBT) in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu state. Since 1978, IBT has translated the Bible into at least 10 languages that reach more than 3 million people.

Although Selvam says it takes 10 years to get the New Testament into a local language using a mother-tongue translator, his goal is to translate the Bible into more than 200 Indian languages that are spoken by 10,000 or more people.

Selvam is one of thousands of Christians around the world who risk persecution and even death to translate Bibles into indigenous languages and distribute them among remote people groups. New Tribes Mission (NTM) workers Joe and Jana Price were constantly harassed during the 31 years they translated the New Testament into Panare, a language spoken by some 3,500

people in central Venezuela.

“We were investigated a number of times [by Venezuelan officials],” Jana Price says. “Accusations were printed in the newspapers, but never the results of those investigations, [which] would have cleared us.”

By the time the Prices produced the Panare New Testament in 2003 there were about 500 believers in eight congregations—seven planted by indigenous converts. But in 2005, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez expelled NTM from all the tribal areas, accusing the missionaries of exploiting the poor for personal gain.

Some translators have it worse.

In 1990 Ronaldo Lidório, a Bible translator affiliated with Worldwide Evangelization for Christ International (WEC), was kidnapped by Shining Path Maoist guerillas in Peru and thrown into a primitive prison, where he contracted tuberculosis of the spine.

After his release, he became a key player in translating the New Testament into one of the Konkomba dialects in Ghana, but he had to leave the country before the translation was published to be treated for his disease. He now heads WEC’s Amazon team but remains reluctant to discuss his ordeal.

Rómulo Sauñe, a native Quechua believer from Peru, sacrificed more than his health to spread the gospel. In 1983 he formed an organization dedicated to translating the Scriptures into Quechua, which has at least 15 dialects. The entire Bible was printed in Quechua in 1987.

Sauñe married the daughter of missionaries in Peru who were affiliated with Wycliffe Bible Translators, one of the world's leading translation ministries. On September 5, 1991, Sauñe, his parents and other relatives were returning to Ayacucho from a family gathering when about 100 Shining Path guerillas stopped their vehicle. The terrorists lined up the travelers and demanded they identify themselves. As soon as they heard that Sauñe, his brother Rubén and their two cousins were pastors, they shot them down with automatic weapons.

Sauñe is not the only Bible worker who has been martyred in modern times. A German missionary and two Turkish co-workers were murdered at the Zivre Bible press in Malatya, Turkey, last April.

Zivre supplied Bibles and Christian literature to churches throughout eastern and southern Turkey. Two converts from Islam, Necati Aydin, 36, and Ugur Yuksel, 32, worked there with a German believer, Tilmann Geske, 46.

On April 18, at least four young Turks, some of whom had previously attended meetings at the Malatya Evangelist Church and feigned interest in the Bible, arrived at the third-floor room. They tied up the three Christians at gunpoint and stabbed them repeatedly.

Geske and Aydin died at the scene, and Yuksel was barely alive when he was rushed to the hospital. An infusion of 51 units of blood failed to save him.

The police apprehended all the attackers. Also implicated in the crime were a Malatyan police colonel, a soldier, a

parliament member, an Islamic faculty member, and one other person, according to Compass Direct news service.

World's Most Dangerous Book

Translating the Bible is not the only dangerous work. In some places, merely possessing a Bible can bring death.

The World Bible Translation Center (WBTC) reported last January that authorities executed a North Korean evangelist for possessing and distributing their Korean New Testament.

“This is the first confirmed death of a Christian martyr who was sharing the gospel using WBTC’s Scripture texts,” says John Anderson, vice president for publishing and distribution at WBTC.

Saudi Arabia does not allow Bibles to be brought into the country, and foreign Christian workers found with a Bible can be beaten or imprisoned. A Muslim who becomes a Christian in most Islamic nations faces possible death—by family members, if not by the government.

Even though China’s Amity press has produced more than 57 million Bibles since it began operations in 1987, a “significant percentage” was for export to other countries, according to Open Doors, an evangelistic ministry founded by Brother Andrew. Moreover, the government seems to be holding Bible distribution in advance of the 2008 Olympics.

Bibles can be officially sold in China only through government-registered churches, but Open Doors says New

Testaments and other Christian literature cannot be found in places where they once were in ready supply. The need for Bibles is made even more urgent by China's burgeoning house-church population, which is believed to number between 80 million and 130 million.

Some house-church pastors have started printing their own Bibles on private presses run by people itching to make a few extra yuan. However, they can suffer dire consequences if caught.

In September 2004 state security officers arrested house-church pastor Cai Zhuohua after they found 200,000 pieces of Christian literature, including Bibles, in a storeroom he managed. For his crime of "illegal business practices," Cai was imprisoned for three years. He was released September 10.

He, his wife and brother were fined nearly \$50,000. During his incarceration he had to make soccer balls for the 2008 Olympics 10-12 hours a day.

In October 2006 Wang Zaiqing, a well-known house-church pastor from Anhui province, was charged with "illegal business practices," fined \$12,500 and sentenced to two years in prison for producing Bibles and Christian materials.

House-church leader Zhou Heng ran the Yayi Christian Book Room in Xinjiang province and had gained permission to sell a limited number of Christian books printed legally inside China. But on August 31 he was arrested when he went to pick up a delivery of three tons of Bibles sent by South Korean Christians.

A former cell mate claims Zhou was beaten while incarcerated. At press time his fate had not been determined, but if convicted he could face 15 years in prison.

Although India officially is a secular state and guarantees freedom of religion, right-wing zealots advocating Hindutva, or "Hindu nationalism," slander, malign and persecute Christians.

"I record and prove between 200 and 400 cases of anti-Christian violence a year in my unofficial white paper released annually since 1997," John Dayal, secretary general of the All India Christian Council, told Compass Direct news service. "But the actual figure may be from 1,000 to 2,000 such cases a year, perhaps even more."

The radicals' favorite accusation against Christians is that they make converts by force or allurement—but no such case has ever been proved. Most attacks are unprovoked and occur during worship or prayer meetings. If Bibles are evident, they usually are destroyed.

Last September, Bible students with Emmanuel Mission International (EMI) went to the village of Modak in Rajasthan state to distribute Christian materials. After the students had distributed 450 New Testaments and hundreds of copies of the Gospel of John, a mob appeared on the scene, destroyed some of their literature, and threatened to kill them and burn their vehicle. They escaped to another town, where they sold an additional 300 New Testaments and 1,600 gospel booklets.

"One of the main reasons Emmanuel Mission is getting severe persecution is because we are distributing Bibles and Gospels," Bishop M.A. Thomas, founder of EMI, told Charisma. "For almost two years, we have seen severe persecution. I had

to hide myself six to seven months—from the Rajasthan police, the state police, the central police and security forces from all over India.

“My son, Bishop Samuel Thomas, was in jail for 39 days and before that was in hiding for 4-1/2 months. Even now, we are restricted, all because we preach the gospel and give the Bible literature.”

Despite the opposition, Thomas says EMI, which is affiliated with Hopegivers International in Columbus, Georgia, has distributed roughly 200,000 copies of the Gospel of John and thousands of New Testaments.

A Bible in Every Language

Although Bible distribution has faced fierce and sometimes violent opposition, translating the Scriptures into indigenous languages brings its own set of hardships. Scott Stewart, former communications editor for International Bible Society and Send the Light (IBS-STL), says ministry staff members in countries located in the 10/40 Window have been “murdered, kidnapped, and threatened when arriving at and leaving our ministry facilities.”

“Landlords have evicted our operations from leased facilities because of pressure from neighbors who perceived our presence as a safety risk,” he says.

“Other staff members have been beaten, threatened and robbed at their homes. Some IBS-STL staff members have been arrested by local police and taken in for interrogation. Government authorities have interrupted, and at times, even stopped our

printing presses.”

Stewart says truck drivers transporting Bibles have been attacked and abandoned on the side of the road by militants opposed to Christianity influencing their countries. At times IBS-STL teams have received threatening letters from religious authorities in predominantly Muslim nations. Elsewhere, Buddhists have interrupted and even stopped Scripture distribution.

One IBS-STL translator, a convert from Islam, works on translation at night after his family is asleep so they are not aware of his activities. “They are not happy that he does this kind of work,” Stewart says.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Muslims are among the thousands coming to Christ, and the new converts are seeking Bibles.

“I can use 130,000 Bibles immediately,” says Johan Gous, who through Afton, Virginia-based Hope Builders helps support two South Africa-based ministries that have planted more than 2,000 churches in the last six years. Many of these new churches are among unreached or under-reached people groups.

“We need some more copies of Bibles here, so we can fully disciple many sheep here in Somalia,” says one Somali pastor. “We lost our family members, friends, citizens and high-ranked government officials in the fights here because people do not recognize the Lord and kill a fellow human being like a hen. Please, please, please, if you are true Christians, help us save our people from Satan’s world by donating Bibles.”

A financial investment can help distribute existing Bibles,

but even in nations with a strong Christian presence, translating the Scriptures into indigenous languages can be a difficult task.

One Wycliffe team translating the Old Testament into Dinka Cam for the people of southern Sudan had to leave the country because of difficulties with the government. They went to Kenya, but were troubled by nationals, who, facing severe unemployment, thought they should have been hired for the job. A senior Wycliffe translator who refused to pay a bribe to a Kenyan policeman was put in an outdoor cage for several days.

The Wycliffe missionaries moved to a friendlier environment in Uganda. Then when the situation in war-ravaged Sudan changed for the better, the team relocated there to continue their translation work. It is unknown if they will be able to remain long enough to complete their work.

Wycliffe International reports that there are 6,912 languages in the world. All or part of the Bible is already translated into 2,426 of these. That leaves 2,286 languages in “probable need” of Bible translation. A native speaker can translate the New Testament within 10 years. Translations into languages for which the alphabet must first be created can take 30 years or longer, especially if no one in the local tribe knows any other language.

Still, translators pursue the formidable task undaunted. Wycliffe’s Vision 2025 is to have either a portion of the Bible in every one of these languages or the translation work under way by 2025.

“God continues to allow us to participate in the greatest

acceleration in Bible translation the world has ever seen,” says John Watters, executive director of Wycliffe International. “Nearly 30 percent of the languages in which there is currently some Bible translation activity did not have such activity seven years ago.

“There are new projects among 539 language communities, potentially impacting over 160 million people.”

He says that by putting greater emphasis on partnering with national translators, Wycliffe is hopeful that Vision 2025 will be reached—providing essentially a Bible for everyone.

John M. Lindner edited the missionary magazine for Christian Aid Mission for 25 years and in 2004 founded World Christian Ministries, which issues a weekly e-mail newsletter focusing on indigenous missions. He is an ordained minister and lives in Charlottesville, Virginia, with his wife, Jo Ann.

Do You Treasure God's Word?

The Bible is our Creator's guide to life. We should make it our goal to read through it every year.

By John Hash

The Bible is the only infallible, authoritative, inspired Word of the one true God. It is a serious error for us to assume that we can decide what we should or should not read of God's Word.

In this God-inspired book we are warned not to add to or take away from the things that are written in it (see Deut. 4:2;

Rev. 22:18-19). To refrain from reading all of His Word means we inevitably will “take away” from what God gave us to know.

The Bible itself says that all Scripture is essential: “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is [essential] ... that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16-17, NKJV).

To be “thoroughly equipped” means to be fully prepared for every experience in life. You will learn from reading the Bible what God planned for you to be as well as how you can be prepared for eternity because “the Holy Scriptures ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15).

We need to be dependent on the Holy Spirit to reveal His will as we read His Word. But God’s Spirit will not reveal what we refuse or neglect to read. God wants us to desire His Word so that we may “grow thereby” (1 Pet. 2:2).

Jesus emphasized how vital His Word is to a Christian’s life. “‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed’” (John 8:31-32).

The Bible teaches us two things of utmost importance:

1. How to become the people God wants us to be. Jesus said: “‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’” (Matt. 4:4). “Bread” refers to our daily food; but “every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” is vitally important to our eternal destiny.

“Every word” begins with Genesis 1:1 and ends with Revelation 22:21. If we fail to read all Scripture, then we will be something less than what God planned for us to be.

2. How to accomplish His purpose for creating us. The key to a successful life is discovered as we read all the Bible and do according to all that’s written in it (see Josh. 1:8). The consequences of not reading the Creator’s guide to life are severe and irrevocable. By comparison, all other goals are insignificant.

The apostle Paul prayed that we might be “filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding” and that we might “walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Col. 1:9-10).

Think how tragic it would be to fail to fulfill God’s perfect plan for our lives because we wasted our few short years achieving material goals.

Many are prone to assume that they can please God using their own good judgment, overlooking the fact that He said: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes” (Prov. 3:5-7).

To think we can choose what part of the Bible to read or not to read is to substitute our opinion for the intelligence of our Creator who said that “all Scripture ... is profitable” (2 Tim. 3:16, emphasis added).

There is no better plan for reading the Bible than to begin with the book of Genesis and end with the book of Revelation. The Bible is the key to our finding God's will in our lives. The apostle Paul said: "Holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain" (Phil. 2:16).

John A. Hash has for 31 years encouraged people to read the entire Bible in one year. Learn more at [.](#)