

When God Doesn't Speak Your Language

Despite technology that instantly connects the world, one-third of all languages today still don't have a Scripture translation, and only 6 percent have the entire Bible. These ministries are rapidly changing that.

Samuel Mubbala came to know Christ as Savior in 1970 while working on an early translation of the Lugwere language Bible. In those days, the Bible used in his Ugandan community was in Luganda. Though it was a language of wider communication in the area, few in Mubbala's people group (known as the Bagwere) understood it.

"To me, it felt like God was a Sunday visitor who came dressed in ceremonial garments, speaking the Luganda language, and would vanish after the service," Mubbala says.

After hitting various dead ends on the version over the years, Wycliffe Bible Translators sent missionaries to the people group of 500,000 in 1999. Since then work has proceeded at a lightning-quick pace compared with previous efforts.

Mubbala and others received training in literacy and translation techniques. Among other steps: building an office to house the project, establishing a committee to oversee it, standardizing the language and starting a Lugwere dictionary that is nearly done.

Today more than half the New Testament is complete, with four books published to stimulate reading while people await the finished product. Professing Christians now number 2 percent of the population, with many indigenous Pentecostal churches formed in addition to mainstream denominations.

"The Lugwere Bible translation seems to be the anchor of

Christianity in the community,” says Mubbala, team leader of the project.

As rapid as advancements in eastern Uganda appear, the speed at which translations are being completed around the globe is even faster. Thanks to technology, more reliance on native translators and better cooperation among agencies, the Bible is headed for every corner of the world. Much remains to be done, since approximately 2,000 of the world’s 6,800-plus languages still don’t have a translation. Many that do don’t have the full Bible. Yet the 30-plus years it often took to complete a translation has been cut in half by some. The World Bible Translation Center in Arlington, Texas, reports finishing a New Testament in just three years.

“There’s an end-times element to this,” says Jim Thompson, regional field director for Chicago-based Bible League International. “In Matthew 24:14, Jesus said the gospel of the kingdom would be preached to all people groups and then the end shall come. God the Father desires that every people group, which includes culture and language groups, be able to hear about Jesus Christ.”

Technology Brings extreme change

Today this goal is unfolding via developments once only dreamed of in science-fiction novels. One example is a translation taking place on a remote island in Indonesia under the direction of The Seed Company, a subsidiary of Wycliffe. Larry Jones, senior vice president of field programs, says satellites that came online in 2009 enabled his wife to connect via the Internet with a friend in the rain forest. Thanks to electronic exchanges, the translation that used to drag because of difficult travel and long lapses in contact is nearing completion.

“What this has enabled them to do is involve many people in this final revision process,” Jones says. “That they can do

that on-site involves many more people and so they're getting a higher quality product. They're getting more engagement with the community, which is excited about getting Scripture in their own language, and they're also getting it much faster."

This type of cooperation is producing spin-off benefits. Two years ago, a physician in India invited the Seed Company to his region. His effort to create a translation over the previous decade had modest results. Instead of waiting for a Bible translation, the doctor—a believer—wanted help producing scripturally based stories in a matter of months. He promised to use them in ministry to people in the medical clinics, orphanage and schools he supported.

Just after the first set was completed, severe flooding drove thousands of local people into refugee camps. Storytellers visited the camps to tell the scriptural stories in a familiar tongue.

"[The refugees] had never heard the name of Jesus in their ... language before," says Roy Peterson, president and CEO of the ministry. "Churches have been started in six people groups"

Wycliffe Senior Vice President Ruth Hubbard traces the origins of this acceleration to 1999 when various ministries adopted Vision 2025—a campaign that set 2025 as the year for seeing a translation in progress in every language needing one.

After establishing that goal, a linguist with the language-development nonprofit SIL International developed Adapt It, one of more than 60 software products the Seed Company offers to support field workers. The program helps translators navigate languages that have a common base; for example, French, English and Spanish, which have Latin as their common root.

It speeds up the process by enabling a draft that is about 85 percent accurate, Hubbard says. While considerable refinements are needed, a first-draft Bible can be ready in weeks instead

of years. Augmenting this are programs that accelerate the process of interpreting passages.

Other developments are enhancing work elsewhere. One Wycliffe translator in Florida visits a people group in Asia regularly and confers the rest of the year with them on the Web phone service Skype.

“God allowed man to create and develop the computer and all the technology that went with it for His purposes and lets the rest of the world use it,” Hubbard believes. “Skype is affecting our work, and it’s phenomenal.”

Translating Together

Last year, Robert Briggs of the American Bible Society (ABS) got a glimpse of the dramatic changes that are hurtling translations toward completion.

During a trip up the Amazon to the Saramakan tribal community, he met an SIL translator who worked 25 years on the translation that was later published by the Bible Society of Suriname. Today that translation is available in print and audio. Briggs sees a day when it can be delivered to mobile phones via a new ABS partnership with Wycliffe and Biblica.

“It’s remarkable,” says Briggs, ABS executive vice president of Global Scripture Ministries. “Even though we couldn’t get to this village except through a dugout canoe, I looked around and saw people using cell phones, even in this environment.”

This doesn’t mean that technology has all the answers. ABS still needs an average of 12 years to complete a translation. It will take at least 15 years to complete work on 600 active projects in some 200 countries that the New York-based agency and its 147 United Bible Society partners have started.

During the 14 years Robin Rempel has been with Wycliffe in Kenya and Uganda the pace has remained steady—an average of 15

years to complete several New Testaments, she says.

She notes, however, that “in the long run, it is much more cost-effective and sustainable to build the capacity of mother-tongue speakers to do the work. The translators never have to take a furlough or leave to get their children educated or to care for elderly parents back in their countries.”

This approach has helped the Seed Company propel Wycliffe toward completing its 700th translation in 2011. Relying on nationals has shaved more than 50 percent off completion times since 1993, though the work isn’t totally void of Western involvement.

“Our national colleagues feel very empowered with this model,” the Seed Company’s Jones says. “We see a lot of ... projects ... increasingly using local people in strong leadership roles.”

Besides the increases in translation efficiency, agencies that once competed with one another are now working together, which is having a major impact on translation progress.

“I see God behind this great Bible-translation movement,” says Greg Pruett, president of Dallas-based Pioneer Bible Translators. “We’re cooperating more now than we ever have. I see that as a great move of the Holy Spirit.”

This groundswell stimulated the formation last year of the nation’s first doctoral program in Bible translation at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Mass. Program mentor Roy Ciampa credits this new academic emphasis to a demand for well-trained translation consultants in the developing world, heated debates over different approaches to translation in English-speaking contexts and a growing awareness that no single translation will accomplish everyone’s purposes.

More Mobile Than Ever

The partnership between ABS, Wycliffe and Biblica isn't the only one focused on digital Bibles. The goal of one ministry, which asked not to be identified because it strives to reach areas hostile to Christianity, is to digitize content for computers, cell phones, cameras and portable projectors.

Thanks to technological developments, the organization can place hundreds of hours of video and audio files as well as multiple printed translations on a microchip the size of a fingernail. Users can place it on a computer without standard installation processes, which leaves no traces for the prying eyes of a police state.

"The world is getting cell phones," a ministry spokesperson says. "The way the world is going to read the Bible in the next 10 years is on their cell phone."

This reality is creating a shift in emphasis at Faith Comes By Hearing (FCBH), one of the leading distributors of audio New Testaments for the 50 percent of the world that is functionally illiterate. FCBH has produced dramatized Scripture recordings in 500 languages. With its numbers expanding amid faster translation processes, it hopes to release 1,500 more over the next five years.

Its leading tool has been the Proclaimer, a device the size of a small box that is powered by electricity, battery, solar or even hand-cranking. It is used by listening groups of up to 90 people. More than 59,000 devices were sent into the field last year (nearly 250,000 since 2006), but that figure pales against cell phone distribution.

In the three months after FCBH debuted its app for the iPhone last July (followed by ones for the Android and Facebook), it recorded 5 million "touches" with an average listening time of 37 minutes. In addition, by texting "24253," users can receive daily Scripture readings.

"As technology improves and becomes free, we'll be able to

push Scripture to people's cell phones in rural areas," says FCBH International Director Morgan Jackson.

Yet the remaining translations won't come easily. Peterson points out that many translators face difficult, dangerous circumstances and must keep a low profile. Even more challenging is finding adequate assistance for them.

"We need to get people around them who can train them [and] be a colleague to make sure their translation is accurate and clear," Peterson says. "We are finding there is a paucity around the world of people who are able to give that kind of help."

Still, the variety of efforts underway show how God is raising up new resources to finish the job.

Ken Walker, a freelance writer based in Huntington, ., is a regular contributor to Charisma.

Read testimonies of communities transformed by the Bible being translated into their native language at·

How Can You Help?

Each of these ministries has unique ways of getting the Bible into the world. Here's how you can partner with them.

- *Wycliffe Bible Translators* Enlist in prayer initiatives, offer feedback and learn how to participate in various areas of interest. Go to [www.wycliffe.org](#) or call 800-WYCLIFFE.
- *The Seed Company* Help unreached peoples receive the Scriptures. Go to [www.seedcompany.org](#). Prayer resources are also available

at .

- *American Bible Society* See the online catalog at [http://www.absonline.org](#) for projects under “Hope for the World.” To donate to Every Tribe Every Nation, call Teresa Harder at 484-654-3477.
- *Pioneer Bible Translators* Credit card donations can be made at [http://www.pbt.org](#).
- *Faith Comes By Hearing* Donations can be made at [http://www.fcbh.org](#). Or go to [http://www.militarybible.org](#) to donate toward Military BibleStick, a digital audio-player preloaded with the New Testament that the ministry ships to U.S. soldiers overseas.