

Bible Translation as We Approach 2025:

What's Been Accomplished and What Remains



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Bob Creson and his wife, Dallas, have worked with Wycliffe for over 35 years. Bob has served in a variety of leadership roles, including with Wycliffe Bible Translators International and SIL International. He was SIL field director in Cameroon and Chad, West Africa, International Vice President for Personnel, and International Field Director for SIL before his appointment as President/CEO of Wycliffe Bible Translators USA. He has been a member of SIL's board of directors, and currently serves on the board of the Wycliffe Global Alliance.

Between His resurrection and ascension into heaven, Jesus charged His apostles and followers with the Great Commission: to make disciples of all nations. At the time, the apostles could not have known just how wide-ranging that mission was (and is). Even the more well-traveled among them could not have grasped the size of the world and how its population would grow.

God often sets goals for us that are bigger than we could perceive, let alone achieve, on our own or in the span of our lifetime. The Great Commission is one such goal. Through the perseverance of Christians all over the world, we are approaching a milestone: the availability of the Good News about Christ in a language people relate to best, and in a form they can use.

For nearly 2,000 years, Christians all across the world have devoted their lives to this mission—bringing the Good News of Jesus Christ to all peoples—and at the end of their journey passed the torch to a new generation who would build from their sacrifices and advance the work. *Mission Frontiers* has chronicled many of these diverse and arduous efforts, ranging from church planting and evangelism to the pursuit of justice for the enslaved and oppressed.

When Christian believers carry the gospel to unreached communities, there is no more potent medium through which to receive it than in the language most familiar to them: the community's native language—the language of their birth. It's what we at Wycliffe Bible Translators USA describe as their “heart language”—the language they think in, dream in and pray in. Scripture is God's primary way of speaking to His people; it is the foundation of the Church. However, the reality for millions around the world is that they still have no access to Scripture in the language they know best.

At Wycliffe Bible Translators, we recognize Bible translation as an integral part of the Church's global mission that all would know of God's unconditional and enduring love for them. Our goal is to eradicate Bible poverty and ensure that all have access to hear God speak to them in a language and form they can clearly understand.

Vision 2025: How Far We've Come and How Far We Have to Go

Wycliffe's vision began as our founder William Cameron Townsend was challenged by a native Cakchiquel speaker, Francisco Diaz, to ensure that his people heard accurately this good news not in Spanish, but in his

northern tongue, Cakchiquel. In the 75 years since Townsend founded Wycliffe, we have sought to make this a worldwide reality, working alongside local communities and churches, and numerous partner organizations both in the United States and around the world. Through this collaborative work and the unmistakable guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have witnessed countless lives transformed by newfound access to the Bible.

Over time, we've discovered thousands of languages never imagined by Townsend, moving the goal line of Scripture access for all even farther away. By the year 2000, while many groups had access to Scripture in their own languages, many others did not. Our leaders at the time realized that at the rate we were going, it would be 150 years before a Bible translation project had even begun in the remaining languages around the world. As emerging local partners and churches exploded and technology radically cut the time needed to complete a translation, they knew we could do better.

The Church has never shirked at the enormity of the Great Commission, and neither did Wycliffe's leaders 18 years ago. They trusted God's heart for the people of the earth and their conviction so that, in faith, they raised the bar and set an audacious, aggressive, seemingly impossible goal of having a Bible translation project underway in every language by the year 2025. And they invited others to join in this vision. Believing that with God nothing is impossible, and when He calls, He also equips, Vision 2025 was launched. Together we rekindled our sense of urgency and committed to working in partnership, developing creative strategies, building the capacity of others, and working toward sustainability of anything started. We trusted in God's providence and adopted this vision as our mission statement: to see a Bible translation program in progress in every language still needing one by 2025.

We currently estimate there are about 7,000 spoken languages across the world. Almost one out of three has adequate access to Scripture. Nearly 2,200 language communities—the highest number on record—currently have translation projects underway. But roughly 1,600 language communities are still waiting for a translation project to begin and have no access to any Scripture in the language they know best.

When Wycliffe's work first began, Bible translation everywhere was largely done with a manual typewriter or by hand, and the occasional loss of physical manuscripts caused entire projects to be restarted from scratch. Communication with other translators required expensive

and unreliable international phone calls and dangerous transportation. Back then we didn't fully understand that languages rarely exist in isolation but we've since learned so much about the multilingual world in which these language communities function.

As articles in this issue detail, Bible translation today looks far different than it once did. Thanks to local ownership of translation programs, streamlined communication, transportation, Bible translation software, digital publication and other technological innovations, translators across the world are able to complete projects on a timetable that would previously have been unthinkable.

A Common Framework for Bible Translation

Technology has dramatically sped up the translation process, but we do not allow speed to be our primary goal. Instead, the first commitment must be to clear, accurate and natural translation. As one organization working within a broader alliance, Wycliffe Bible Translators has adopted a shared set of missiological principles that constitute a "Common Framework for Bible Translation," which shapes everything we do.

The principles include relationship, partnership, stewardship, ownership and accelerated impact. This framework was promoted by Every Tribe, Every Nation, a coalition of 10 translation groups that have produced the vast majority of the Bible translations in existence today.

The "Common Framework for Bible Translation" prioritizes working with the local church to get translation projects started in every language that needs one. Isaiah 55:11 says, "it is the same with my word. I send it out, and it always produces fruit. It will accomplish all I want it to, and it will prosper everywhere I send it."

Establishing and Maintaining Relationship

One of our primary goals for translation projects is the establishment of deep, committed and enduring relationships among translation teams, impact partners and local communities within a geographic region. This also includes technical partners, donors and prayer partners within the target geographic region or community. The development of these communal and incarnational relationships is essential to helping the body of Christ grow and flourish, but also to the completion of translation projects themselves, which can be complicated and have historically spanned decades.

For example, in March of 2017 in South Sudan, a people who speak the Baka language celebrated the completion of the Baka New Testament. It was the culmination of a project over 30 years in the making. But it was a project that faced numerous challenges. When translators first encountered the Baka language, it was only a spoken language. The translation projects required the development of a written language as well as literacy training materials to ensure Scripture engagement. Illnesses as well as other circumstances within the local church caused several different partners to redistribute responsibility, resulting in a local pastor, Rev. Bennett Marona, becoming the project leader.

Furthermore, due to the civil war in Sudan, Rev. Bennett and the other translation team members were forced to relocate to a refugee camp in the Democratic Republic of Congo and then on to Uganda before finally coming to completion back in what had since become South Sudan. At each stage and over every obstacle across those three decades, the project was able to persevere because of the strong relationship of a multinational team, selflessly committed to bringing the Word of God to the ears of those who speak Baka.





Relying on Partnership

In Bible translation, partnership is paramount; translation goals, products and plans are determined collaboratively. Throughout the New Testament and the history of the Church, the body of Christ's growth has been the collaborative responsibility of the body itself. It remains a global community of believers fulfilling diverse yet vital roles, working toward the common goal. An uncoordinated body stumbles, but a coordinated one accomplishes much; so, too, does Bible translation work best in partnership.

Bible translation requires a wide breadth of collaboration: local language experts, linguists, translators, literacy workers, project advisors, donors, publishers and distributors. For this reason, Wycliffe is proud and honored to work with networks of Bible translation organizations like the Wycliffe Global Alliance. This collaboration saves decades of data-gathering, learning customs and cultural nuances, building relationships and many other efforts required to begin a translation. It's an unprecedented, globally unified effort of believers to pool knowledge,

resources and access to unreached people groups, and will play a pivotal role in closing the final gap and translating the Bible into every language in need on earth.

We saw this phenomenon in action in the Bible translation project for the Roviana people of the Solomon Islands. Christian missionaries first reached them with the gospel in 1902, 116 years ago. Since then, two separate advising agencies, a publisher, a recording company, a series of donor organizations and eight translators were needed to overcome a seemingly endless series of challenges. Finally, in May of 2017, the Roviana people celebrated a complete printed Bible and audio version of the New Testament in their heart language.

The project took immense collaboration, and the inspiring outcome could not have been accomplished by any single group. Their success demonstrates the incredible impact that the body of Christ can have through such cooperation and perseverance—something we look forward to seeing the Holy Spirit accomplish in many more communities.



Prioritizing Stewardship

When Jesus entrusted the Great Commission to His followers in His absence, it required that we be faithful stewards of what He has given us. In Bible translation, faithful stewardship means that projects are well-developed, well-designed, well-resourced and well-managed with a high value on mutual accountability and transparency among all partners.

It means working with excellence: realizing the full potential of all available resources—from technology to personnel—to produce translations that are clear, accurate and natural to the local speakers in a way that honors them, our partners and God’s eternal Word. This isn’t just about physical resources, but also about our work and our time.

Our value for wise stewardship should permeate every other principle in the “Common Framework” because it is crucial to completing the task well, together and for God’s glory.

Celebrating Local Ownership

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When the work of Wycliffe and our partners began, most translation projects were for isolated people groups with limited educational opportunities and little knowledge of the outside world. This meant that the first task for our translators was to shed light on their need for God’s Word; the result, in many cases, was that we “owned” the project more than local communities did.

Bible translation has evolved as the world grows more interconnected—many language groups are now in a

position to own their translation projects if they have the right support. It's always been the case that when communities own their projects, not only are they more committed, but are also more likely to use the Scripture after translation and apply its teachings.

We've seen this at work in Peru. Mark and Patti Bean have been facilitating a translation cluster project, in which multiple distinct Quechua languages work together to achieve translation faster and with better accuracy. After recently finishing the Old Testament, they are revising their translations of the New Testament in hopes of printing the full Bible.

The team is a committed group of members, many of whom travel from great distances to work at the translation site, sacrifice time with their families and turn down more lucrative job opportunities to continue working together. For one member, the journey is a three-day walk and a ten-hour car ride. What keeps them coming back to work again and again? They believe in the power and importance of their task. It's their commitment to bringing the Word of God to their own people; nothing could be more rewarding or more urgent than sharing the gospel with their community in a language and form they can understand.

Achieving Accelerated Impact

All of these principles coalesce in making an accelerated impact. With so many languages still without access to any usable Scripture, a central focus of the "Common Framework" is to accelerate impact by implementing short-phased projects that develop accessible Scripture products which respond to pressing ministry needs of the Church.

Part of the accelerated impact comes through adopting technological innovations, but the overall emphasis is on prioritizing projects that readily provide access to Scripture to those who have never heard God speak to them in their own language.

The Ilchamus people in Kenya demonstrate the expediency of providing Scripture in easily accessible forms at an accelerated rate. After translation attempts failed in the past, the Ilchamus people approached one of Wycliffe's partner organizations, Bible Translation and Literacy in Kenya, over concerns that material hardships and spiritual warfare were harming their efforts to bring Scripture to their people. The new, collaborative effort began by identifying portions of

Scripture that most closely addressed the particular needs of the community where receptivity to the gospel was highest—poverty was at the top of their list—and the best scalable distribution methods.

The partners decided to translate the Gospel of Matthew, because of its focus on God as provider, in both print and audio form as the most efficient way of having the greatest impact. After four months of careful development and design and six subsequent months of actual translating, the Ilchamus people published the Gospel of Matthew, distributing 1,000 printed copies and several hundred audio recordings. Because the book's teachings were particularly relevant to their communal needs, the Ilchamus people understood how the gospel applied to them. As a result, lives were transformed and churches gained more momentum for further translation projects.

By scaling the translation projects this way and aligning feasible goals with an unreached people group's specific needs, Scripture is able to have a meaningful and (relatively) immediate impact in those communities. Even more importantly, it introduces the gospel to more people who have no access to usable Scripture and allows the Word of God to speak to people at the heart level. We've witnessed the Holy Spirit amplify this seemingly small foothold in profound and powerful ways.

Accomplishing Vision 2025

Fulfilling Vision 2025 will not be possible without continued collaboration within the global body of Christ. Other articles in this issue attest to the power of prayer in completing the task and the need for individuals and churches to invest time, money and other resources in God's global mission.

Vision 2025 is a bigger goal than we could ever achieve on our own. But by the provision of the Holy Spirit, the rich heritage and incalculable sacrifices of those who went before us, an evolving approach to Bible translation and a prayerful and committed global Church, we remain committed to accomplishing Vision 2025 and are closer than we've ever been to having a translation project underway for every people still waiting to experience God's Word for themselves. We hope you'll join us on this faith journey. 