

# AN UNLIKELY MIRACLE

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BUT THEN, AREN'T THEY ALL?

## INTRODUCTION

In a remote corner of South Asia, among ancient rocks and militant thorns, Christ's church has taken root among the Ng people. It can only be described as early growth. Tender shoots are springing up in shallow soil as rain falls in the distant mountains and the water seeps into valleys that have been parched for generations. Leaves and flowers strain toward the *Sonlight*, eager to grow.

The Joshua Project counts 0.0% Christians among the Ng. This either confirms their insignificance, or their significance, depending on your perspective. External estimates of their population are less than 3,000. Language surveys diagnosed their language as near-death forty years ago. They are isolated geographically, politically, religiously, economically, linguistically, and missionally.

But once a week Ng believers hike for hours to gather in three small congregations to worship, to confess and repent, to embrace one another, to sing praises, and to hear God's Word – in a foreign language.

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For years these congregations have only heard God's voice in a foreign language. With no scripture recorded in their own language, their only option has been spontaneous personal or pastoral translation as they read and listen. The cumulative result of this experience has been twofold.

First, their thirst for God's Word has increased to passion. For many, God's Word is their highest priority. They ponder, pray, plan, and persevere toward having God's Word in their own language. This is their dream, their goal, their calling.

Second, they are unwilling to see their families and friends pass into eternity without hearing God's Word in their own language. By their own count 30,000 people speak their language. They are not praying for a missionary or waiting for someone else to care and come. They are not asking permission. They are the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, His church. They are responding to the Holy Spirit and moving forward in faith.

## HEARTBROKEN

For several years our English Language Learning (ELL) team had been working with our international partners in this country to increase their English competency. Because most of the global training resources and references for Bible translation are in English, competency in English translates directly into access to these resources. As the global Bible translation team has expanded internationally in recent decades this English training has become extremely valuable.



Dr. Bruce Smith is President and CEO of Wycliffe Associates. You can learn more at [wycliffeassociates.org](http://wycliffeassociates.org).

Talking, eating, praying, laughing, crying, and learning English together created a deep relational bond between our ELL team and these local partners. While reflecting on the impact of both the training and the relationship, one of the young local leaders in Bible translation opened his heart and shared the burden that had been weighing on him for years. His burden was the agonizing pace of progress in Bible translation for the languages of his nation. His heart was broken for the lost and dying, for his friends and neighbors, and for the millions vainly pursuing ungodly darkness – for lack of light.

### THE QUESTION

At the convergence of encouragement from our ELL team and his own deep discouragement for the lack of God's Word in local languages, he ventured an unanticipated question. "Could you use the principles of English Language Learning to teach us how to accelerate Bible translation for our people?"

The only immediately obvious answer to his question was, "I don't know." But love and relationship demanded the follow-up response, "I'll try."

### A NEW APPROACH

In the ensuing months Wycliffe Associates' ELL Director, Dan Kramer, researched the existing resources for Bible translation and began building a new training approach for translators on the same educational foundation that supports English Language Learning. Since he has described the theoretical and practical underpinnings of this new approach in a paper titled *MAST – Mobilized Assistance Supporting Translation: Brain-Based Bible Translation Methodology*, I will not attempt to recount the details here.

One fundamental tenet of MAST is that it builds on God-given language ability. Language is not a unique specialty. It is pervasive. It is part of God's image in mankind. Even its astonishing diversity is a result and reflection of God's redeeming grace. From a practical perspective, language competency is the readily available natural resource for any community beginning Bible translation.

Another teaching principle integral to MAST is that

you begin with the students. Most teachers do not have the luxury of selecting or deselecting students. The community sends the students. The teacher teaches whoever shows up. The practical implication of this in MAST is that the translators are chosen by the community. In fact, every aspect of Bible translation is entirely decided by the community. They choose who is involved, when, where, and how. They decide who to include in the process, and who to exclude. They decide which book, or books, to translate first and last. They decide the pace of translation. They decide when, where, and how the translation is published and distributed.

### LATE ARRIVALS

After months of curriculum planning and preparation, Dan organized an initial MAST training workshop in South Asia. Translation teams from five languages were invited. Four of the translation teams had already completed traditional training and translation of significant portions of scripture during the years preceding the MAST workshop. One team, from the Ng, had neither training nor translation experience. Since one of the translation teams had completed all of their New Testament except 1 and 2 Thessalonians, this became the translation priority for the first MAST workshop.

The workshop was scheduled for four weeks in June 2014. The first two weeks would be MAST training. The second two weeks would be actual translation.

On the first day of the MAST workshop only four of the teams were present. The fifth team, from the Ng people, did not arrive. So, the MAST training proceeded without the Ng.

**“Could you use the principles of English Language Learning to teach us how to accelerate Bible translation for our people?”**

At the end of the two weeks of training the four teams were ready to begin translating 1 Thessalonians. It was at this point that the Ng team finally arrived. They had entirely missed the MAST training. As the other teams began translating, the immediate question was, “What should the Ng team do?”

Dan considered the options, then encouraged the Ng team to just begin translating 1 Thessalonians along with the other teams. They could just learn “on the job.”

### INSPIRATION

At first the teams that had prior Bible translation experience struggled with the MAST method.

The MAST method starts with a group overview of the book, chapters, and passages. After the group discussion the chapters, passages, and verses are delegated to individuals to work on separately. So, instead of working sequentially through the translation as a group, the individuals initially work in parallel. This naturally accelerates the process based on the number of translators involved.

Each translator then reads, or listens, to a small portion of scripture from source translations. The portion must be brief enough for the individual to hold it in short-term memory, but long enough to be a coherent thought. Once the translator has the scripture portion clearly in mind they close the sources and think through the passage in their own language. As they think about the passage they make an initial “blind draft” in their



own language. This gets the draft started with a very natural expression of the passage in the target language.

Blind drafting was not part of their prior training, so it took some time for the experienced teams to learn this new approach.

Once the initial draft is written the translator returns to the source texts to check whether anything has inadvertently been added, subtracted, or distorted. The initial draft is then revised to increase the accuracy and

### Wycliffe Associates Installing Print On Demand Systems for Quick, Easy Access to Printed Scriptures in Dangerous Areas

(Orlando, Florida, USA)—Wycliffe Associates has launched a program that enables local Christians to print the Bible on demand in nations where owning a copy of the Bible can lead to arrest or worse. The program will facilitate the printing and distribution of the Scriptures for language groups without any of the Bible.

“Following Christ can be a death sentence in many hostile countries around the world,” says Bruce Smith, President and CEO of Wycliffe Associates. “Christians are persecuted, arrested, hunted down, and may lose their lives for translating the Bible. Wycliffe Associates provides the most effective technology and equipment

to empower national translators in this life-changing work—especially when it means keeping translators safe in the most dangerous areas imaginable.”

Each high-speed digital printing system provided by Wycliffe Associates includes a computer, printer, binder, laminator, and paper cutter. Local Christians are trained to operate the system, which is set up in a safe house. Then, when a language group is ready for printed copies of the Scriptures, they can be printed from a flash drive and discreetly hand carried and distributed.

“Even in a hostile nation where it is life-threatening to follow Christ, Print On Demand will allow Bible printing and distribution to proceed,” says Smith. “A group of believers secretly meeting in a closed country is already asking us for one of these systems. I am deeply committed to helping national believers share



clarity. After each translator completes their delegated passages they then exchange their drafts and peer check each other's work. After this check the group begins harmonizing the individual translations to assure they are using the same words for key terms and are consistent in their descriptions of the people and events in the book. Already, immediately following the initial drafts, there are three stages of quality checking under way: individual, peer, and group checking.

God's Word, while doing everything we can to protect them. Now, with Print On Demand, God's Word is available in increasing measures."

In one West African nation where a system has been installed, hundreds of copies have been printed of the newly translated Old Testament books of Hosea, Amos, and Haggai, and the New Testament book of Luke.

"The systems not only print Scriptures and Bible resources with great speed, but they are also cost efficient," Smith says.

Wycliffe Associates is currently raising \$225,000 to provide 15 Print On Demand systems at a cost of \$15,000 each for Christians in hostile nations who are without the Scripture in their language.

"Right now, we have the opportunity to provide a remarkable resource for printing and distributing

As the experienced translation teams moved forward, the Ng team also stepped out in faith. Dan and others coached and mentored them along the way, but the Ng translators quickly learned the MAST method and put it into practice.

1 Thessalonians is not a lengthy book, with just around 89 verses. Within just a few days each of the teams had drafted and revised 1 Thessalonians through three quality checks. In addition, two experienced translation consultants reviewed each of these translations. To everyone's great encouragement, the translation consultants concluded that the quality of the translations done using the MAST method was equal to the quality of translations that had taken months longer to accomplish. The translation by the Ng, who had missed all of the MAST training, was also high quality.

As you would expect, the local believers were exhilarated by the translation progress MAST enabled.

### **THE MIRACLE UNFOLDS**

Based on the encouragement from the June 2014 MAST workshop, the Ng believers began planning for a second translation workshop late in 2014. Their goal was to recruit 26 translators. This would be almost 10% of all Ng believers! For a variety of reasons they ultimately had 13 translators at the second workshop, just half of their goal.

But in just two weeks these 13 translators drafted and checked Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and 1 Timothy – 48% of the New Testament!

God's Word," says Smith. For more information go to [wycliffeassociates.org](http://wycliffeassociates.org).

### **About Wycliffe Associates**

Organized in 1967 by friends of Bible translators, Wycliffe Associates empowers national Bible translators to provide God's Word in their own language, partners with the local church to direct and guard translation work, harnessing their passion and desire for God's Word, and engages people from all around the world to provide resources, technology, training, and support for Bible translation.

Because millions of people around the world still wait to read the Scriptures in the language of their heart, Wycliffe Associates is working as quickly as it can to see every verse of God's Word translated into every tongue to speak to every heart. Last year, 2,544 Wycliffe Associates team members worked to speed Bible translations in 73 countries.

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Because they were the only language working at the second MAST workshop they added an additional evening session of community checking to thoroughly discuss key terms, spelling conventions, and dialect choices among their three different dialects. The energy of this team was inspiring! As they gained experience applying the MAST method each translator averaged drafting and checking 34 verses per day. With 13 translators that yielded 442 verses, drafted and checked, per day!

### THE NEXT CHAPTERS

At the close of the December 2014 MAST workshop the Ng team printed their scriptures and sang their way home for the winter. Their plan to reconvene to complete the Ng New Testament in April 2015 was disrupted by local events, so their current plan was to gather again during June 2015.

In the meantime, word about MAST has begun spreading virally through global church networks. As of June 2015 the MAST method has reached 115 languages in Asia and Africa. A little more than half of these are languages where Bible translation was stalled for a variety of reasons, but has been reinvigorated by MAST. The rest are languages where no Bible translation has previously occurred. Churches are excited by the opportunity they now have to steward Bible translation and revision for their own communities.

Based on the current requests for MAST training we expect that this strategy will be in use in at least 230 languages by the end of this year.

### OBJECTIONS

As I saw the Ng teams translating the New Testament at an unprecedented pace and quality I struggled to find the right words to describe it. The only word that seemed to fit was “miraculous.”

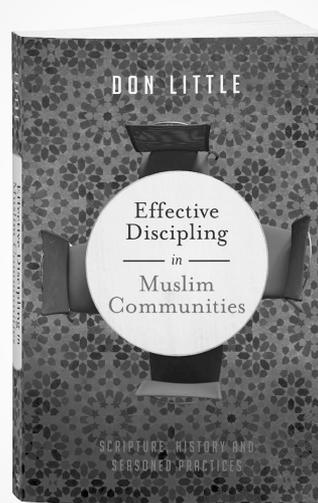
In recent days I have often reflected on the experience of the blind man in John 9. His blindness was assumed to be a judgment against sin, either his own or his parents’. When he began to see, his neighbors assumed he must be someone else. As he described how Jesus healed him, the authorities opened an investigation and accused Jesus of violating the law. Then the authorities questioned whether he had ever been blind and accused his parents of deception. They insulted him, invoked their superiority, and threw him out. As for the formerly blind man, he believed in Jesus as Lord and worshipped him.

All of these objections, and more, have been leveled against MAST, Wycliffe Associates, Dan, myself, our friends and families, and the Ng. In the coming days the number of languages, and experienced partners in Bible translation, will multiply. If MAST is “iron” we pray and trust that it will be sharpened by the “iron” of God’s people. If MAST is “clay,” it will perish.

### BY FAITH

In the meantime, we worship and praise God along with the Ng and every language group pursuing His Word. 

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