



# Wordly Collective: Building a Collaborative Ecosystem for Minority Language Community Flourishing

An interview by Steven Spicer with Melvyn Mak

**Steven Spicer** is the Innovation Lead in Frontier Ventures' Winter Launch Lab, where he works to integrate innovation and spiritual discernment in mission. His orientation towards group discernment was shaped by four years in a prayer ministry focused on encouraging intercession and member care for emerging movements in the Middle East and Central Asia.

**Melvyn Mak** was a banker and stockbroker, then a pastor, and is now in the midst of combining the two for the restoration of the kingdom. He has been married 40 years to Linda and has three adult daughters.

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New ways forward in mission often emerge by making connections between people who are able to collaborate together to address a challenge. In other words, relationships are at the heart of social innovation in mission. This rings particularly true when it comes to serving and working among minority language communities (MLCs) who lack access to important information, resources and opportunities due to language barriers. Mission organizations have long been at work among these communities from the angle of Bible translation and gospel witness. However, there are also incredible opportunities to express the gospel in innovative and holistic ways through the formation of collaborative relationships at the nexus of language translation and community development.

One non-profit social enterprise inviting the church into this collaborative space is Wordly Collective. In partnership with SIL International (a faith-based NGO focused on language), they aim, “to help minority language community flourish using the languages they value most.”<sup>1</sup> More specifically, they, “seek to empower marginalized minority language communities, help more people step out of poverty, create localized information that will improve overall health and well-being and improve access to education.”

To discover more about what makes Wordly Collective's approach innovative, I recently had an opportunity to interview Pastor Melvyn Mak. In addition to being a board member of Wordly, Melvyn is also chairman of Transformational Business Network (TBN) Asia, which takes an ecosystem approach to supporting social entrepreneurs, and co-founder of Actxplorer, which combines travel with benefit to local communities. He describes his call and gifting as being an integrator, which I might suggest is a synonym for “social innovator.” The essence of social innovation is the creation of new opportunities for people to overcome social challenges and barriers through the alignment of healthy and collaborative relationships. That seems to me an apt description for what Wordly Collective is doing.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wordlycollective.asia/>

See Pastor Melvyn's explanation and reflections on Wordly Collective:

**Steven:** Hi Melvyn, could you share some about how Wordly Collective was developed, particularly with a collaborative approach that connects many different stakeholders around minority language communities?

**Melvyn:** Wordly Collective is about mother tongue language and how language can help bring people to the forefront of opportunities. We want to take whatever we have in terms of the linguistic side of things and connect with the world at large to bring about community flourishing—in other words, it's about the whole idea of missions but done in a more collaborative and integrated way.

Wordly Collective runs a translation platform. We are basically an ecosystem builder. The translation app will connect translators with users from the different sectors of society, and as we do that, we actually are a connector. If you need a document, a health advisory, a curriculum, a book, or whatever to be translated, we can actually connect them. Then we give a fee to the translators according to what is normally accepted as a translation fee.

Now, of course in the beginning some NGOs wanted to be translated, but they could not afford it. Likewise, missions organizations could not afford it, so then we would raise funds for them. In other words, we pay one side [translators], but to help the other side. We bring forth connection so that the people working with a particular minority language community can actually speed up a lot of things and exchange ideas—what works and what does not.

Let's say, for example, we look at a minority language group in Myanmar. That is really at the forefront because they have many minority language groups with more than a million

people in Myanmar. (Wordly has chosen to focus on the roughly 386 MLCs with at least one million speakers each.) We connect people with these minority language communities. It could be foundations, it could be governments, it could be the United Nations, or it could be social enterprises. And when we can start connecting them, then we realize that actually there's a role for us to play. Basically, we are trying to create turnkey projects that deal with economic, social, mental well-being and so on. And the Church has a role to play because the Church is involved with the spiritual and emotional well-being part of it.

**Steven:** Could you share about the role of geography and location as you work with stakeholders and minority language communities in the Wordly translation ecosystem?

**Melvyn:** For example, in Singapore we have migrant workers. They're from Bangladesh; they're from Myanmar. And it's not just in Singapore. You see, in Malaysia, you see similar representation of migrant workers as well as refugees, like those that are in Indonesia too.

In other words, we're talking about the diaspora. Now, our heart is that if we are reaching a particular language group, we always have this belief that, like the Book of Revelation says, God gathers the nations, every tongue, every tribe, every people, every nation. It is about the mother tongue. The heart language is still very key. God has not forgotten that, so just because people migrate to English for economic reasons doesn't mean that it's forgotten. In fact, I think the mother tongue can help speed up opportunities, and also it connects them in the diaspora. In other words, the Malaysian site working with the Rohingyas can know what the Indonesian site is doing because Wordly seeks to be that ecosystem builder.

**Steven:** As you bring together all of these different stakeholders and work with minority language communities at home and in diaspora, there are people from many different cultures and backgrounds involved. How does Wordly Collective think about this interreligious space of collaboration?

**Melvyn:** The proposal is that the space where the Jubilee Gospel [the bringing together of the Church and marketplace for the sake of alleviation of poverty] operates is perhaps the largest evangelism space that the Church has not thought about. Because our model [of evangelism], and I speak about myself as well, is people coming to listen. But I've realized that in this space of fighting poverty through enterprise, you have so much connectivity—with the Muslims, the Buddhists, the Hindus, the Christians—the different faiths all mixed up together. For example, every one of our Transformational Business Network Asia conferences has interfaith collaboration. Those guys know that I'm a pastor. Sometimes my team would slip up and say, "Oh, Pastor Melvyn!", so they know. And there's nothing that I hide. I work with, for example, the CEO of the Buddhist foundation organization, who is a great man—a great guy with a big heart of compassion—and then we work with the Islamic boarding school principal, their leader, and we all know our own religious affiliations.

But we all know that we all need to come together to help one another, especially actually Christians helping Muslims. Because in our region is Indonesia, which is the largest Muslim nation in the world, and they need help. So the question is who will help them?

## Conclusion:

So, what makes Wordly Collective innovative? Christians have already been at work among minority language communities. In fact, Wordly's partnership with SIL International builds upon years of language work in mission. Translation services also are not new. Phone apps providing services are not new. Neither are non-profits focused on health, education, and community development. But the reality is that with all those things in place MLCs too often lack the information they need to make informed decisions, to access new opportunities, and to move out of cycles of poverty. The innovation modeled by Wordly Collective is the creation of new opportunities through collaborative relationships. It is the connecting together of all of these contributors in one ecosystem, and then applying them together in new contexts. The result is a sustainable new offering to overcome barriers to MLCs flourishing "in the languages they value most." By thinking holistically about the people and communities that need to be involved, Wordly is able to offer services and relationships that bring opportunity—it is social innovation to address social challenges of marginalization due to limited language access.

It is no coincidence that MLCs are also often Unreached People Groups. While Wordly Collective is a neutral platform, it is an expression of a vision for kingdom transformation to improve spiritual, physical, mental and emotional well-being. It demonstrates value for the ethnolinguistic identity and dignity of peoples. Additionally, it provides a space for humble witness—both among the MLCs and with other stakeholder organizations in the midst of interreligious collaboration. It is an invitation for followers of Jesus to apply their vocational skillsets in a broader collaborative ecosystem that aims to bridge the information gap to see minority language communities flourishing. Thus, it is also creating new opportunities for us to follow Jesus faithfully alongside these communities.

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