



Statements Regarding the Wycliffe Global Alliance's Relationship with the Church

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Introduction

The Mission of the Wycliffe Global Alliance (the Alliance) is: *“In communion with God and within the community of His Church, the Wycliffe Global Alliance contributes to the holistic transformation of language communities worldwide.”* One of our Core Values states: *“The Church as Central in God’s Mission—Believing the Church is created, called and equipped by God to disciple the nations.”*

These foundational statements, approved by the Alliance Board of Directors and known to Alliance Organizations, acknowledge the Alliance’s understanding of the central role of the Church in the mission of God. However, for the past several years there has been rising awareness of the need to examine more deeply and purposefully how the Alliance, as it is evolving in the 21st century, can better understand our relationship with and within the Church.

In recognition of this, the Alliance hosted more than 60 participants from around the world for three missiological consultations. These consultations were held in September 2017 (South Africa), November 2017 (Germany) and March 2018 (Thailand). The theme for these consultations was: *The Church—The Alliance: An Alliance Missiological Exploration of its Relationship with the Church in God’s Mission.*

The purpose of the consultations was:

- to explore the relationship between the Church and mission;
- to inform the Wycliffe Global Alliance and its organizations on how they relate to the Church and churches in mission. This included how the Alliance speaks about itself in relation to the Church, and how the Alliance relates to the Church and churches regarding Bible translation practices; and
- to clarify and strengthen the ecclesiology of the Alliance.

It was clear from the outset that defining the relationship between the Alliance and the Church would be complex. The Alliance, which is itself made up of different types of organizations, relates in different ways to different components of the Church. Some types of relationships between the Alliance and the Church that were recognized include the following:

- the Alliance as a Global Partner of the World Evangelical Alliance
- church denominations as Alliance Organizations
- individuals in Alliance Organizations sent by their local churches
- local churches directly involved in Bible translation projects
- individuals in Alliance Organizations holding clerical roles in local churches
- Alliance Organisations relating to churches in their own countries, but also abroad

In the broadest sense the Alliance acknowledges the Church as the body of Christ, past, present and future. We also recognise that the Church is expressed in local contexts.

With this in mind, the following statements arose out of these consultations, as generated by the participants, and are grouped under different headings. Collectively, these statements represent the diversity of the Alliance's understanding of the relationship between the Alliance and the Church, the Church's role and responsibility in God's mission, and how together we can focus on Bible translation movements.

These statements provide a broad scope of understanding stemming from the three consultations. It is advisable for Alliance Organizations to consider these statements, applying them as relevant in their relationship to churches in their specific contexts.

To more fully appreciate the significance of these statements, a brief historical overview is first presented, giving insight as to the founding of Wycliffe Bible Translators in the USA in 1942. This mission agency is the originating organization for what is now the 100+ alliance of organizations called—as of 2011—the Wycliffe Global Alliance.

Historical Context

A primary ecclesiological influence for Wycliffe Bible Translators stemmed from its founder, William Cameron Townsend, and his roots in the evangelical church of the USA in the first half of the 20th century.

At the time, Wycliffe's early leaders saw evidence that the evangelical church as a whole was not particularly interested in cross-cultural mission amongst minority people groups, or Bible translation in vernacular languages, although individual churches sent out and supported individual missionaries to serve in these contexts.

Wycliffe's early leaders were not alone in their views. There were some 75 faith-based mission organizations created in the 1920s-40s, based at least partly on this view of the church in North America not being focused on missions.

Evangelical fervor in the era of Wycliffe's formation positioned Christians to see themselves as responsible for bringing the Great Commission to completion, or at least doing their part to accelerate the mission mandate. This sensibility played hand-in-hand with the growing spirit of pragmatism in the general North American mindset—get the job done (whatever that job may be) using whatever means worked. Thus, in the second half of the 20th century, as more and more Wycliffe organizations were started in countries around the world, their members and leaders carried with them some of this source DNA “organizational code”. This manifested itself as concentrating more on the efforts of the actual translation task in the field, and less on partnerships with churches—both in the field and in homelands.

More recent developments early in the 21st century saw leadership in Wycliffe International (now the Wycliffe Global Alliance) recognize the need for greater collaboration and partnership between churches and Bible translation movements. In August 2006, Wycliffe International held its first missiological consultation, with the overall purpose of providing a framework for its leaders to identify missiological issues. One of the issues focused on communication with the church concerning Bible translation. The participants summarized the topic as follows: Although the Church as central in God's mission is a core value for Wycliffe International, its role and relationship with churches is often confused because of the lack of a clear ecclesiology within Wycliffe. The missiologist facilitating this consultation encouraged the participants to recognize this historical bias and regain an appreciation for the local church.

Statements from Consultation Participants

On Understanding the Role of the Church in God's Mission

An understanding of the local church is that its purpose is to glorify God as it seeks to remain faithful to the mission of God, to draw people to Christ and to make disciples. The Church is the unique agent of God's mission in the world. The mission of God is his self-revelation as the one who loves the world and is involved in and with the world. The Church is the body of Christ, created to join him in his mission. It is a privilege for local churches to participate with God in his mission. Local churches can show people how God relates to them and display what it means to know and be known by God.

God's mission results in holistic transformation—which includes both the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is also integral because of the interplay in diversity and

the range of ministry aspects and expressions that often lead to holistic transformation. It is in both the sharing of the truth of the gospel and the love of God with all peoples, as well as transformed lives, that God is glorified.

The local church teaches the whole council of God through his Word, so people can see the great picture of God's mission. This includes the role of making disciples. The Church is the image bearer of God before the nations, and therefore it is central in God's mission as God's primary instrument to achieve his mission. The Church is God's prophetic voice representing God's agenda according to his Word. The Church becomes an agent for God's shalom—peace between humankind and God and between people and creation.

While we recognize that the Church is larger than any local church or mission agency, the Alliance and all who are part of it have the opportunity to serve the Church and complement its ministry. Together, we participate with God in the restoration, reconciliation and transformation of all things for God's glory.

On Understanding the Relationship Between the Church and the Alliance

The role and relationship of mission agencies with the churches they relate to is a complex one. This can be expressed as a tension, but it can be a good tension. In the Alliance, we respect the complexity. We understand that churches have a broad range of theological viewpoints. We note our opportunity to serve these churches through helping them understand the needs and opportunity for Bible translation, since that is our focus. We seek to work with and serve the Church where there is a mutual understanding and appreciation of the Bible as God's Word and the desire for all peoples to have access in a language and format they can best understand.

In the Alliance, we recognize that we can assist churches in making God's Word available in languages they can best understand. We recognize that we are part of the Church and that Alliance Organizations may have practical experience in serving with and complementing the local church in addressing Bible translation. We recognize that at times we are carrying out ministry on behalf of the Church, especially in areas where local churches may lack expertise or presence.

Within the Alliance, the relationship with the Church is increasingly rich and complex. Some churches (and church denominations) are Alliance Organizations because they are leading and managing Bible translation programs in their contexts and want to be part of a body focused on Bible translation. In this way, the Alliance provides a global community that supports and enables the Church to play a greater role in Bible translation movements.

In certain contexts, some churches or church movements wish to walk alongside the Alliance, and desire a certain level of relationship with the Alliance without structurally

becoming part of the Alliance. Bible translation organizations within the Alliance are encouraged to act in good faith with the Church, and hold a position of humility and a servant attitude, while using their expertise with and on behalf of the churches in their context. By working together in this way, we recognize the unique opportunity there is for unity around the Scriptures. Bible translation is a means for expressing true Christian community, though there may be diversity in our theological backgrounds and histories.

On Deepening the Relationship Between the Church and the Alliance

Churches and Bible translation organizations, when working together in an interdependent partnership, may reflect a deep expression of a relationship and friendship that demonstrates values of the kingdom of God.

In the Alliance, we intentionally seek to humble ourselves, and acknowledge that our primary identity is in the Church. While our focus is Bible translation, we wait for the Church, and we desire to help serve the Church as it seeks to express an understanding of the need for Bible translation, so that this is the agenda of the Church and not an imposed agenda. We recognize the need to be willing to give up control in order to facilitate collaboration with the Church. We desire to work together with local churches in identifying the areas that we are willing to hold loosely or relinquish in order to facilitate greater collaboration in God's mission.

We recognize that at times and in different contexts across the Alliance, some parts of the Alliance and in some of our plans and programs related to Bible translation, we did not engage well with the Church, whether local, regional or global. We recognize our need to discern what God is saying to us in regards to the Church. We recognize the need for churches and mission agencies to be inter-connected, while at the same time realizing that at a local level, there is a diversity of expressions of the relationship between churches and mission agencies. We recognize, from a biblical perspective, that our role may be to demonstrate a posture that is focused on God and not on past history or previous structures. When we see broken relationships among organizations in the Alliance and the Church, we encourage a process of reconciliation and restoration of these relationships. And where no relationship exists, the development and nurturing of such relationships is encouraged. We recognize that when we function well together, God's blessing flows through the ministry of Bible translation to the Church and the nations.

On the Role of Bible Translation and the Church

One may ask, to whom do the Bible and Bible translation belong? First and foremost, ownership belongs to God, and to the Church in all of its expressions. At the local level, the context of the community where Bible translation is needed may determine the actual Bible translation process. Bible translation is an important part of God's mission. God

invites his Church to participate in this aspect of his mission. At the local level, translation of God's Word also requires following best practices, and these need to firmly integrate into the local context. When local expressions of the Church are active in Bible translation programs, there is opportunity for increasing unity between local churches and mission agencies. Additionally, when local churches are active in the Bible translation process, this helps ensure that these churches value and use the translated Scriptures in their teaching and discipleship ministries.

Conclusion

Participants in the three consultations faced the challenge to describe the Alliance's relationship with the Church. This was not an easy task. We recognized our need to find multiple ways of understanding the Alliance's relationship with the Church. For example, an Alliance Organization which is representing a church body, such as in Ethiopia or in Indonesia, will speak differently about their relationship with the Church than a mobilizing-focussed Alliance Organization operating in a country where Bible translation is not needed.

The consultations noted that although uniquely related to the Church, the Alliance does not perceive itself as, or seek to fulfill the role of, a church. We readily acknowledge that God has created his Church for his mission. It is within the unique relationships of the Alliance with the Church, that the Alliance needs to continue to find helpful ways of working out these relationships in local contexts.

The multiple relationships between the Alliance and the Church (and for that matter, mission agencies in general and the churches they relate to,) may be expressed as follows: working independently of, interdependently with, and dependent upon, the Church. It was acknowledged that all three of these states-of-being are, to a certain extent, present in many different ways in relationships between the Church and the Alliance. If we ignore this reality we may continue a dichotomy and an often-present tension between the Church and mission agencies in functioning collectively as expressions of God's mission. The concept of a fluid, multi-dependent relationship may be a better way to understand this situation.

Ultimately, the relationship between the Alliance and the Church should be seen in terms of kingdom friendship as opposed to the fulfilment of a task. In this way, the Alliance and the Church can fully participate together in Bible translation movements. This means that we in the Alliance must encourage healthy attitudes in relating to the various expressions of the Church. We are mindful about how we express our expectations of the Church to participate with us in our agenda of Bible translation. The Church should not be seen as a mere resource centre. Our interaction with the Church should arise from a relationship position within the Church.

Finally, as we continue to deepen relationships and commitments to the Church at local, national, regional and global levels, we acknowledge the Church's centrality in God's mission. Therefore, we deliberately seek to explore with the Church, ways for it to give greater ownership and leadership to Bible translation movements. We look forward to the day when the Church, in all of its expressions and contexts, is primarily giving leadership to Bible translation movements, and the Alliance's role is to help it be successful in such an endeavour, to the glory of God!