

What is Our Theology of Advancement and Progress and What Milestones are Imminent?

'Bible Translation Advancing' @ FOBAI, Albuquerque, USA, 1 May 2019

Kirk Franklin

Overview: *How do we know what God considers progress in the Bible translation movement and what milestones are theologically significant in the coming decades? What milestones will we cross together in the coming years and when?*

Introduction

Church historian Brian Stanley notes how “The twentieth century did not quite turn out to be the century of Christian missionary triumph that the founders of the *Christian Century* [i.e. the 20th century] fondly imagined.”¹ Near the start of that century, during the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910, the conference chairman John R. Mott proclaimed that all available resources would be quickly deployed to support a missionary conquest to the ends of the earth. The conference was initiating a comprehensive plan for evangelization that would see the world completely ‘reached’ in the foreseeable future.

Due to a number of very complex sociological, geo-political and religious reasons, this bold vision wasn’t achieved. The world wasn’t reached in that century. Stanley points out: “Statistical estimates suggest that in percentage terms Christians accounted for a slightly lower percentage of the world population in 2000 than they had at the beginning of the century”. Sourcing the World Christian Database, Stanley noted how the global percentage of Christians “fell from 34.46 percent in 1900 to 32.65 percent in 2005.”² Rather than progress, there was regress.

Declaring bold pronouncements in God’s mission, as well intended that they may be, may not be our wisest tactic.

Using statistics has been a common method for determining the state of progress because we have been told, ‘you are what you measure’ or ‘what gets measured counts’. It’s one thing to measure the growth of the church, it’s another to figure out how to measure progress in the Bible translation movement. David Livermore helps us: “What do we want to measure? What valid, reliable tools exist to measure this?”³

Kevin S. Higgins notes how our efforts to “complete the Great Commission has successively reworked its terminology and methodology. One major emphasis has been

¹ Stanley, Brian. *Christianity in the Twentieth Century*. Princetown University Press. 2018, 10.

² Ibid, 10.

³ Livermore, David. *Leading with Cultural Intelligence*. AMACON. 2015, 213-14.

the collection of data about people groups and the status of evangelization and Christian expansion. Depending upon the researcher or the specific database in question, such data may include percentages of exposure to the Gospel, resources of literature available in a people group, the status of church planting, etc.”⁴

Thanks to SIL International, we have the Progress.Bible platform with regular updates about the state and need for Bible translation. Statistics that we find helpful can include how many languages already have adequate access to Scriptures, how much Bible translation work is underway, how many languages we’re pretty sure still need Bible translation, how many complete Bibles have been translated, and so forth.

Is that enough, or is it a complete picture? In order to help me find out, I conducted research through a questionnaire I sent to 32 leaders in the Bible translation movement. I asked these three questions:

1. How do we know what God considers to be progress in the Bible translation movement?
2. What milestones are theologically significant for the Bible translation movement in the coming decades?
3. What milestones will we cross together in the Bible translation movement in the coming years and when?

I received responses from 25 leaders and categorized them as follows:

WGA leaders	WGA Organization leaders	Friends of WGA	Global North	Global South
13	9	3	56%	44%

The responses provide most of the basis for this paper.

1. How do we know what God considers to be progress in the Bible translation movement?

Let’s consider the meaning of ‘progress’. It holds the idea of advancement, breakthrough or “movement towards a goal”.⁵ Consequently, when we use ‘progress’ within the context of the Bible translation movement, we are generally attempting to describe that our goals are advancing, how something significant is happening. This is intended to carry a generally positive connotation.

⁴ Higgins, Kevin S. ‘Missiology and the Measurement of Engagement: Personal Reflections on Tokyo.’ *International Journal of Frontier Mission*, 27:3 2010, 127.

⁵ ‘Progress’ in <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/progress>, accessed 17 April 2019.

Seth Godin states that we don't require more data to solve our challenges. Instead, we need "more insight, more innovation and better eyes".⁶ In other words, we need to discern how to turn data into information from which we extract "useful truth".⁷

It's not straightforward to decide what God considers to be progress. One participant declared, "In truth I don't know", and then went on to suggest that God is "more concerned with transformation than with progress" because God isn't necessarily "waiting for us to get the task done".

(1) Biblical support

What glimpses to the concept of progress does the Bible give us to inform our question? Participants offered reflections on these passages as examples.

(a) Rev 7:9-10 (NET) "... here was an enormous crowd that no one could count, made up of persons from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb" Viewing this through a grid of progress, we see how "more people [are] able to praise God's name in their own language; and there are... more people knowing Him in their own language, with the ultimate goal that more people will be real followers of Christ." We also see how Jesus is "building this global church which will last forever. So, we believe that work which supports this agenda is worthwhile because it is in line with His purposes."

(b) Hab 2:14 (NIV) "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." The application suggested: "Bible translation constitutes an essential contribution... and fulfilment... to spreading the knowledge of the Lord."

(c) Col 1:24-29 (NIV) "...To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." The application is that progress can be seen as "more people having access to Scripture, which is a source of the knowledge of God."

(d) Luke 10: 1-4 (NIV) "... the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two.... He told them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road." The application is "indications of how to prepare for... declaring the arrival of the Kingdom of God are: Simplicity of life (carry no money belt, no bag, no shoes), focus (greet no one on the way) and prayer for added workers. A Bible translation project doesn't always start in this way. Perhaps the community is not ready, or the workers have not been prepared accordingly."

⁶ <https://seths.blog/2019/03/data-into-information/>

⁷ Ibid.

(e) Luke 10:21 (NIV) “... “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children....” When the 70 return and give Jesus a report, “His reply seems to focus on something that has been taken for granted, gratitude to God for what He has done for us.” Therefore, we observe how “we measure success by what we can see, but Jesus measures success by remembering what Christ did for us; therefore, out of gratitude we share this with others, which is the best motive.”

(f) Acts 2:41, 47 (NIV) “Those who accepted [Peter’s] his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day”; and “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” This indicates a numerical progress relative to the spread and acceptance of the gospel. We can think of this when we are considering how growth in the church through people joining it, could be a parallel to growth in the number of Bible translations completed.

(g) Acts 5:16 (NIV) we read of crowds from “towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick” to be healed. Philip finds fruitful witness in Samaria in **Acts 8:7-8** “For with shrieks, impure spirits came out of many, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. So there was great joy in that city.” Philip encountered and baptized the eunuch in **Acts 8:38**, which is later attributed as a key factor in the gospel being taken to and accepted in Ethiopia. In **Acts 9:31** there’s mention of the church “throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria” accompanied by an increase “in numbers” which indicates the growth of the church out of Jerusalem. And of course, the Apostle Paul and his bands’ three missionary journeys charts a progression of new communities, cities and regions being evangelized. The parallel in the Bible translation movement can be more and more communities engaged in the movement.

(h) Acts 16:15, 40 Growth in and understanding the Scriptures is mentioned in many encounters in Acts, such as Lydia who is identified as a “believer in the Lord” and later Paul and Silas return to her home and “met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them” which indicates growing hunger for God’s Word. Later in **Acts 17:11** Paul encountered the Berean Jews who received the gospel “with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” The parallel for the Bible translation movement can be a growth in engagement with Scripture. In other words, progress in God’s eyes could be “transformation through God’s Word received by new groups of people that come to know God.”

(2) Mission of God (missio Dei)

How do we define progress noted in the mission of God? In general terms, the Mission of God is His purpose of redemption and reconciliation of all that was lost through the fall. God’s instrument for His mission is His body, the universal Church. He invites the Church to join him. A participant notes how “God desires to see the church

communicate this mission in ways that present Him as a Father to people in different languages and cultures and these people embrace Him thus and not as a stranger. In some areas, the church has understood this and it is the church that seeks Bible translation done in the languages and cultures where it is found”; and “a growing recognition within the Church of the significance of language to a people group and the need [and] the importance of the Word of God in this language. This builds their identity in God and their dignity as God’s people.” Consequently, “Faithful, biblical theological and missional progress means that Bible translation is progressing the way it is meant to – fitting in with the purpose and mission of God.”

A participant declared that “We cannot know how God intends to achieve his plans. For example, humanly speaking we look for success with our strategies. But God may have a deeper plan to glorify himself and achieve his purposes through our weakness and failings.” We can view Bible translation as having an “incarnational impact [that is displayed in] the quality of relationships and partnerships involved in the process.”

A participant adds, “the Bible does not lead us to believe that Bible translation is inherently valuable as an end in itself: it is the proclamation of God’s Word, and its application to people’s lives, which is valuable. So, if we were to measure progress, we would need to measure it by ministry usefulness, and not by a simple count of languages or translations complete.”

(3) Bible in use

In General: Progress is noted in people’s lives when, “every person that gets to read, hear or see God’s Word for the first time”, which is “part of the Great Commission of going and make Disciples”; “when [God’s] Word is being communicated in a way that is faithful to His revelation and when lives are transformed”; and “when more people have access to His Word in languages and formats they can understand and when they respond to His invitation.”

Since God’s mission uses people, an indicator of progress is “when there are multiple, sustained global... ‘testifying... voices’ of God’s people” who are involved in the Bible translation movement.

At a basic level, progress happens “when people are able to access the Word of God in their heart language. Generally, this means Old and New Testaments. For oral cultures it also means the Scriptures available in oral forms. But there is a bigger story than simply ‘availability’. This is the story of people within a language group owning the process of translation and Scripture use as a fundamental part of their church life. Such ownership, capability and capacity development enable people to continue to be involved in ongoing translation and revision and alongside this, the local theologising that comes from deep engagement with the Word in their specific contexts.”

In the Church: Progress is seen in God's Church when it "is emerging from the translated Word"; when "local bodies of believers have made their own decisions of what language(s) serves them best for connecting with God and have the responsibilities for accessing the Scriptures in that chosen language(s). The informed choice of what language best incarnates Jesus in the Word for them"; and when there's a notable "increased [commitment] to serve the church."

In the language communities: Progress noted in the language communities is obvious when "lives, communities, nations [are] transformed by His Word; [when] His Word [is] being used by the communities and impacting all spheres of life"; "when the community is leading from the front and it is deciding what's best; when the community is prepared to make the sacrifice; and when the community is using their own economy to make things happen."

It happens when "the community is involved in the translation process – as reviewers and supporters – community contribution in the translation process." It occurs when "translated Scriptures are available in formats that the community can engage with: book, audio or video, digital formats, etc." Progress in the community is noted when there is "regular interaction with the Scriptures" because there's the "availability of the Scriptures in a language that people can best understand and in a form that's easy to engage with and people are empowered to use those Scriptures." Progress happens when we're "serving not only prestigious groups, but ... marginalized and 'forgotten' groups (e.g., serving Deaf communities). Progress is evidenced through "individual and community transformation ('turning to Christ') through the Scriptures"; and "when more lives and communities are being transformed and have the opportunity to worship him in the context of a church (church is not edification but the community of people)."

In the Bible translation movement: There's progress through "the incarnation of the Bible translator in a community (e.g. 'the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us'; John 1:14). The first step is when the translator lives the life of the community he/she is serving, sharing in their joys and sorrows, being transparent and vulnerable in the community – being the face of Jesus."

Progress happens in the movement "when more leaders and organizations are working in unity, expressing God's love for one another, and serving in collaboration... in the context of peace... in a way that glorifies Him." We see it in "the way in which we work... the nature of relationships and partnerships." Importantly, "progress in Bible translation as a phenomenon is when Christians and Christian leaders globally are convicted and committed to Bible translation as an indispensable part of cross-cultural mission where there is a need for it, and that Bible translation is an indivisible part of the *Missio Dei* that each church must commit to whether within or without their context."

Leslie Crutchfield and Heather Grant note that “success is found when nonprofits strive to create collective impact... and thus are able to achieve greater results than any one player could achieve alone.”⁸ The implication for the Bible translation movement is to move our collaborative efforts into ones that we share objectives together and hold each other accountable for these goals.

(4) How we measure

Figuring out what to measure, or why it should be measured is not straightforward. How do we do this? Intentionally creating good spaces for reflective practice allows for God to “influence our practice” and it helps us calmly determine what we measure and how we do that. As a participant noted, “There are so many things that can be counted, and I don’t think it’s wrong to talk about numbers of people and organisations involved in the Bible translation movement. But... it’s not just about what God has called us to do, but also the way in which we do it. To love the Lord our God above all else and to love our neighbour as ourselves.”

Knowing God: What criteria do we use in evaluating our progress? A participant suggests: To do so, “we have to know God’s heart...: people living in close communion with Him. Progress in Bible translation has to be measured eventually against that.” This doesn’t negate the evaluating of quantifiable areas of progress such as, “the number of verses or New Testaments or Bibles translated; and the number of organizations or language groups involved.”

Kingdom of God: We consider the Bible translation movement from the perspective of God’s kingdom when “Jesus [is] worshipped as Lord, [there’s] love for one another, generosity, collaboration, humility, the gospel presented to all people(s).” The implication is that progress has to be considered against values such as an increase in “unity, respect, and love... and that everyone would be treated with dignity and respect regardless of ethnicity, gender or socio-economic standing.”

There’s also these factors to consider when measuring growth in the Bible translation movement: “Shalom increases when God’s Kingdom grows; when unity in His body is strengthened; when His name is more glorified, His lordship more recognized among the nations; and when the power of His word is ‘deployed’ more broadly throughout His church.”

Bible translation: It’s the “number of new starts as well as completions of translations whether that of the New Testament or the Old Testament”; the “number of Bible translators mobilized and doing it (whether other-tongue or mother-tongue translators) [or] number of churches engaged to be involved in Bible translation.”

⁸ Crutchfield, Leslie and Grant, Heather Mcleod. *Forces for Good*. Jossey-Bass. 2012, 7.

A participant suggests that “productivity metrics have their value and it’s good to aim for specific production goals, because people need access to God’s Word as soon as possible.” But, “participation counts more than productivity.” Indicators of progress need to “include increased participation and leadership on the part of the end-user church and community, and improved relationships between all stakeholders. For example: Measurable progress of direct church involvement in Bible translation (i.e. denominational, seminary, church networks increasingly see Bible translation as a priority for church growth and maturity – because as one participant comments, “God is most interested in building His Church”); measurable increase in financial contribution; increased collaboration between Bible translation agencies; and improved quality of relationships between Bible translation agencies and the local church.”

(2) What milestones are theologically significant for the Bible translation movement in the coming decades?

A milestone is a “significant event or stage in the life of a person”⁹ and for our purposes, the Bible translation movement. A common object is the marker that indicates progress made on a road journey, it shows how distance in terms of kilometres or miles is being reached. When we apply ‘milestones’ to the Bible translation movement, it raised interesting comments from participants: “Do we actually know what a milestone is until we have arrived at one?”; or “We may not know what God considers to be milestones”; and “I am a little concerned about the idea of milestones. While we should be strategic in supporting Bible translation in places where it is still needed, I think we will see the markers on the journey more clearly as we look back than... look forward... through strategic planning.”

(1) Examples of milestones

A participant notes, “It seems that God leads his people through situations and then tells them to remember what he has done, rather than telling them in advance what to expect.” For example, over 3,300 years ago Joshua led the people of Israel across the Jordan River. The Lord told Joshua to have someone from each of the 12 tribes to take twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan and place them on entry to the Promised Land as they crossed over (Josh 4:1-9). Joshua set up the twelve stones to mark the occasion and to remind future generations about what God had done for the people of Israel by delivering them to the Promised Land.

An ancient milestone in Bible translation was the Septuagint, the translation of the OT from Hebrew into Greek in the third century BCE. It was commonly known as the LXX as tradition says it was produced by 70+2 Jewish leaders from Alexandria. This was “an

⁹ ‘Milestone’ in <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/milestone>, accessed 17 April 2019.

event without precedence in the ancient world”¹⁰ because of the acceptance of the Greek language by the Jewish Diaspora in the Hellenistic world. The Apostle Paul used the Septuagint on his three missionary trips.

A participant observed, “As best we can tell, we’re crossing the milestones already.” For example, it’s been nearly 100 years since Francisco Diaz, a Cakchiquel from Guatemala met William Cameron Townsend and helped him see that the needs of the Cakchiquel people were very different to that of the *latinos* (Spanish speakers with European ancestry). Townsend had been selling Spanish Bibles but these were of no use to the Cakchiquel. Diaz and Townsend started a school for Cakchiquel children. Through this the Lord shaped Townsend’s vision that every language group should have the Scriptures in their own language. The milestone is we’re now witnessing the greatest effort to translate, publish and distribute the Bible in every language of the world.

An often-overlooked part of the Diaz-Townsend story, and the formation of SIL International and later Wycliffe Bible Translators, was in fact the friendship between the two men. While the milestone of progress in Bible translation is significant, a participant wonders whether “God is more interested in us, our relationships, the way we disciple one another, than completed translations.”

(2) Changes in theologizing

We’ve often said that an important factor is the contextualization of the gospel that takes place in and through Bible translation. This has relied on the role of the missionary Bible translator as interpreter. A participant notes an emerging theological approach is: “the gospel in context [that is] identifying the existence of God in our domain culture and identity.... It’s the way for authentic transformation” because it acknowledges that God was in the language community “before the missionaries arrived.”

A shift is the emergence of “Native theologies [and] the development of a theology of integral mission that seeks with greater force to attack systemic causes of injustice, poverty, pain, corruption, in order to see the transformation of communities with His Word. How are these compatible with the historical theologies and their sense of urgency that has motivated so many?”

Another shift is the “understanding of, and redefinition of, ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’” of Bible translation movement personnel. The shift engages with newer concepts such as “polycentrism, generosity, community and even prayer among God’s people [in and for] the Bible translation movement” and seeks “greater participation from the global Church. Consequently, “the historic players in the Bible translation movement need to be intentional in leaving room for others to participate.”

¹⁰ Marcos, F., *The Septuagint in Context: Introduction to the Greek Version of the Bible*. Society of Biblical Literature. 2000, 18.

(3) Defining 'theologically significant milestones'

Leslie Crutchfield and Heather Grant in their book *Forces for Good* state, "We get caught up in measuring the wrong things, because the things that really matter are often more difficult to measure.... [T]o achieve greater social change you must also focus on those things that are external to your own organization.... It's about leveraging every sector of society to become a force for good."¹¹

The historic way of measuring a milestone in some circles has been, "Bible translation started/completed in every language that needs one"; "every time sufficient parts of the Bible is translated in a specific language for people to come to faith and salvation in Jesus"; "when people of all ethnicities and languages worship God before His throne"; "availability and access to the Scriptures in the language(s) [and format] of people's choice" so they can enjoy God's Word; "all people having the opportunity to hear and respond (Matt 24:14, Rev 7:9)"; "the number of books [of the Bible] produced"; or "the day the 'last language' is being started."

All of these fit the criteria of 'a significant milestone'. However, what is a "theologically significant" one? How many of us have thought of progress and milestones in this regard? A participant suggests that any "discussion of 'theologically significant' milestones probably needs to happen on a broader basis... as we may need help to get a better grasp on the impact."

(4) Considering theologically significant milestones

The whole counsel of God: A participant notes, "The New Testament teaches that the Old Testament is necessary." For example, in 2 Tim 3:16 (NIV), Paul writes: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness...." The Scripture being referred to is the Old Testament. Therefore, "the Old Testament [needs to be] translated in full. Within the Bible translation movement, we are seeing the deliberate shift from understanding [that] the New Testament or Scripture portions is alone adequate." In other words, a milestone becomes "increased whole Bible translation in places that have only had the New Testament."

The theologian-translator: Theology needs to become more integrated into the Bible translation movement. "We need to talk of the theologian-translator more and more. This implies the church taking leadership in the movement and Bible translation agencies becoming or associated with specialized departments of the church. This also means that the theological landscape of the church is considered and allowed to shape the movement." This milestone could be achieved through a deliberate move towards "theological reflection in the mother tongue and Bible literature in languages other than those that have dominated theological discourse in the past."

¹¹ Crutchfield, Leslie and Grant, Heather Mcleod. *Forces for Good*. Jossey-Bass. 2012, 234-5.

Functions of the church: Many older translations don't adequately meet people's needs because "they may have been poor translations, or language shift may have occurred." Even some newer translations or ones underway may be poor because the "pressure for speed undermines the need for quality."

A milestone we are seeing is a shift towards greater capability, accessibility and capacity in local churches as they engage with the Scriptures and apply the Word into their "specific cultures to bring new understanding to the local and global church [so] that the riches of each culture are brought in captivity to Christ."

(5) Bible translation milestones

The "significant milestone is when the ownership and leadership of Bible translation work in a country/region is handed from Westerners to local people/organisations. This is necessary for churches to become self-supporting, self-sustaining, and self-governing" (e.g., the strategies of Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson).

The church takes ownership: The greatest milestone we are starting to see is the "worldwide church participating more fully in... unprecedented ways... to accomplish God's mission."

... In collaboration: "Theologically, Bible translation must... be a part of the local and global church's mission, and must be carried out in collaboration and partnership with the global and local community of cross-cultural mission and Bible translation practitioners. This is both progress and theological milestones for Bible translation in the *Missio Dei*."

... In unity: "When His Church works together to carry out His mission, I believe it delights our Father!" When there is "unity among participants within the Bible translation movement, there's a genuine joy to collaborate and recognition of each others' strengths and 'successes', recognition by the global Church of this unity (including Roman Catholic and Orthodox) and celebration of it."

... In listening together: "The trajectory of Bible translation and her participants for the future must include learning to listen together both locally and globally to God's voice regarding His mission. This would be the foundation and fuel for future development of Bible translation."

Dan Busby writes, "Ministries are becoming more receptive to hearing from the Holy Spirit first and then using strategic planning to carry out God's plan. But, first, we must

master the discipline of stillness... and be aware of the gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit.”¹²

... In an integrated manner: The Bible translation movement needs to “take stock of new realities that the local and global church are facing, and many churches and mission entities in different parts of the world are still serving from a 250-year-old paradigm. Such milestones will be reached when churches and mission entities integrate Bible translation and Christian mission identity holistically in their pilgrimage of missional transformation for others and themselves in their political-social-cultural contexts.”

... In humble leadership: We are continuing to see “growing awareness and direct participation and responsibility” by the Global South Church for the Bible translation movement” with greater “resource mobilization” and funding; the Church and communities are “taking the lead in ownership – holding the power of informed decision making, and participation.”

... In scholarship: “There is a growing academia in the church that is interested in Bible translation and there will be a shift from the less educated to a well-read translator pool and players in the Bible translation movement.”

... In fruitfulness: “As a result of the Bible translation movement, a vibrant church emerges and grows roots deep into the cultures and ordinary lives of the people.”

Engagement by language communities: There is an “increased voice of local believers in the translation process and in translation decisions”; “Scripture engagement increasingly happens at the front end of the Bible translation process, rather than near or after completion of the translation. Theologically, this recognises that community-engaged Bible translation is, in fact, Scripture engagement” (whereas viewing “Scripture engagement programs as distinct from the Bible translation process unnecessarily delays access to God’s Word”); “where the Church is not present or weaker, engaging with Scripture (in whatever form or type) needs to take place as early as possible”; the “Bible translation agencies no longer decide who needs Scripture, and in what form it will meet the felt need for access to Scripture”; therefore, the “availability of Scripture in oral and/or print [the ‘choice to choose a form that is appropriate’], in all the languages where end-users have expressed their preference and desire to have it” is a significant theological milestone.

Rise of difficult contexts: “Through the use of local theologies as a result of the available Word [makes it possible to develop] disciples in hostile environments.” There are still significant needs in “difficult access countries....” We can expect there to be “questions about culture and Christianisation.... What will be the theological answer

¹² Busby, Dan. ‘15 Trends for Leaders to Expect in 2019, Including a Surprise about Email’, http://www.ecfa.org/Documents/News/15_Trends_for_Nonprofit_Leaders_in_2019.pdf, accessed 17 April 2019.

from us/the Church about operating in limited space [such as] the sinicization of the Bible [as evidenced by the] government approved version in China; or how do we translate and present God's Word in Muslim contexts". In other words, the "use of culturally understood and identifiable key biblical terms in translation – e.g. use of the name of God" are challenges in front of us.

Cultural shifts: Our global-regional-national-local contexts are going to keep looking "different in the coming decades to what it has been like in the past. Technology and engineering make more things possible – internet, travel, etc. – but populism and whatever may come next, is making societies more distrustful of others." We also see how it is difficult to engage the Church in some contexts "in reaching the less reached [because] local outreach and diaconal activities become more popular in our churches in the West [and] we have a harder time to get them engaged."

(3) What milestones will we cross together in the Bible translation movement in the coming years and when?

A key question is discerning how the Lord is leading and directing the movement. A key is "learning to listen and discern together."

(1) Bible translation movement

Will we actually "ever reach the milestone of having finished the work of Bible translation? There will be ongoing needs until the end of time." Let's look at some of the changes affecting the Bible translation movement that help us consider upcoming milestones.

Changes in players: We are "seeing Bible translation moving out of the realm of the 'professionals' to the Church and lay persons." We are no longer the only ones. There are "other players coming in." Bible translation is "openly accessible to all who want to participate... without barriers. The foundational issues of quality assurance will not be addressed in the same way as they currently are. Bible translation will move from 'expert-centric' to ecclesiastical and user-centric endeavours."

To "the degree that the participants of the Bible translation movement are serious about including the Church, we will see work started in the languages that do not have work in progress in this generation, however this requires many more conversations in various circles and levels." "The Church will not participate because we invited them. They will participate because they need Scriptures for evangelism and missions." As the Global South Church becomes "more informed and involved... we can expect to see an increase in the resourcing of Bible translation."

Changes in training: A milestone could be "seeing a fully realized reconfiguration of training and missional orientation for those engaged in the Bible translation process –

coupled with more holistic recognition of what it means to be actively engaged as a biblical translation consultant... with the hopeful understanding that these efforts will grow and combine with similar efforts yet unknown to become a key pathway for a new generation of Bible translators and Bible translations.”

Changes in demographics: In the Global North, “we are entering into an era where the Bible will not have the same value as it has today in the lives of people in the Global South as more people in these communities enter the middle class.” As the Global North baby-boomer generation ages and literally dies off, “their mindsets and influence of resourcing mission activity, including the Bible translation movement... could be noticed by 2035 and even sooner.” The Global South and Global North younger generations will engage in the Bible translation movement. However, it has been primarily “‘constructed’ by the boomer mindset and thus there will be uncertainty as to transition. On the other hand, under God, a revelation of how God will ‘supply’ His mission in this transition time (the late 2020’s) could be anticipated as becoming a new foundation for interdependency among God’s people.”

Changes in integration: “When Bible translation organisations partner very closely with regional and local churches to give support to the churches’ ministry and strategies”; “When Bible translation organisations’ ministries and strategies are integrated with partner organisations, and regional and local churches ministries and strategies”; “When Bible translation organisations’ ministries which are already integrated with regional and local churches ministries come under the leadership and direction of the churches.”

Changes in contexts and approaches: “Multilingualism is here to stay. How do we navigate to save smaller languages? Can transformation happen without Bible translation? If yes, then, what is our role?” “The printed Bible is going to become less and less the centre of focus as people shift to digital and audio forms.” Bible translation is not a “one shot event”, but rather is (or should be/needs to be) an ongoing process of translation, publication, revision, etc...”; “a recognition that until Bible translation becomes a local activity in a language community that the work in that community is not ‘done’. And therefore, that goal (of making Bible translation a locally owned and sustainable activity) should become a primary goal of any externally initiated and motivated Bible translation activity.”

(2) Recognizing our milestones

Some in our movements are predicting that we achieve the “milestone of seeing translation started in the last language where there is need for translation within one decade from now. Perhaps two to three decades from now, these last languages will have Scripture translated and accessible”; “we will see every person on earth have access to the full context of God’s Word in the language that speaks to his/her heart in the next 25 years.”

A participant thinks that “another milestone that may be reached is the realization that in spite of all the focus on counting down to zero, translation will never be finished. New languages will continue to emerge and existing translations will always need to be revised in order for the Church to have relevant Scripture”; “we will likely never have a complete and final ‘list of languages’ (due to language change, dialects, diasporas, etc.) and thus there is no absolute ‘finish line’ to the Bible translation task in this age”; therefore, “Bible translation agencies need to rethink their future long before the translation needs come close to zero. [One way is to] identify the new roles of organizations and missionaries in communities that have completed both the Old and the New Testaments.”

Another participant thinks that “the availability of Scripture in languages all the world can understand seems like a possible milestone in the next 15-20 years. It will take much longer for all the world's language communities to have Scripture in their local languages.

(3) Impact of Vision 2025

Many Bible translation organizations have adopted Vision 2025 as a vision to see Bible translation finally underway for the remaining languages that need it.

The best-known phrase from the much longer Vision 2025 resolution is its quantifiable aim to have a Bible translation program in progress for every language that needs it by the year 2025. When the vision was adopted in 1999 the number of languages needing Bible translation was about 3,000 (plus or minus 10 percent). Now, it is about 2,000.

The full resolution uses language that calls for action such as: “we embrace... we acknowledge... we urge... we commit ourselves... our desire is...” This is the language of intentionality and responsibility by the global Church.

Some adopters of Vision 2025 have turned it into a practical goal with a view that Global North Christians will continue to play key roles in developing strategies associated with Vision 2025. This is logical because the vision was adopted in a time when Global North influence in mission leadership and strategy was at its peak.

Balance is required, with dialogue from the Global South, so that their perspectives will have a continuing role in realizing the vision. This is because the vision takes place in contexts where “the predominance of one culture over others is no longer accepted, and where cultural polycentrism is a fact of our time”.¹³

¹³ Balia, Darrel & Kim, Kirsteen (eds.). *Edinburgh 2010 Volume II: Witnessing to Christ Today*, Regnum Books. 2010, 255.

Almost as a caution to our present situation, Brian Stanley notes how Latin American missiologist C. Rene Padilla when addressing the Lausanne Congress of 1974, “openly attacked American forms of ‘culture Christianity’ [due to its powerful influence far beyond its borders] that reduced the Christian message to a form of cheap grace, a marketed product guaranteeing the consumer ‘the highest values—success in life and personal happiness now and forever.’ He criticized the strategists of the church growth movement for treating the task of world evangelization as a mere mathematical calculation of how to ‘produce the greatest number of Christians at the least possible cost in the shortest possible time.’”¹⁴

Wycliffe Global Gathering 2016: During one of our sessions, we asked the participants to engage with Vision 2025. This was to help us learn about how the vision has been interpreted and applied since it was first adopted. Here are some highlights of that discussion particularly about the urgency theme in the vision:

1) *What do you understand urgency to mean?* We see imagery of a medley relay with different speeds of each leg. Everyone in the race has the same sense of urgency even though the whole race is not run at the same pace and everyone doesn't have the same distance to cover; an urgency is less about the time to translate... and more about the response to need of the people group.

2) *What factors raise the sense of urgency?* Our contexts keep changing – the growth of other religions and the spread of violence; understanding the need and the size of the need, creates sense of urgency; the fact that most of the communities without Scripture are marginalized, and needy; it's not about numbers, it's about people, people for whom Christ died; we want to maintain the quality of the translation – we do not seek to do it quickly, we seek to do it properly – we want to finish well.

3) *How does such a sense of urgency affect your organisation?* Translation is taking too long; why isn't this funded as some partners drop off and sometimes Western partners will only fund for a particular time period, this generates pressure to complete projects; have we let the donors decide what is urgent; in some places the donors put (too much) pressure and local actors are not able to take responsibility and leadership, but this is not the feeling everywhere; and we are accountable to one another based on our shared values and principles.

(4) Measuring in the Church

The Bible translation movement isn't the only part of God's mission interested in counting progress. For example, Karl Vaters notes, “We need a renewed, Christ-honoring, cooperative approach to kingdom growth that ignores no one, includes everyone, and utilizes the gifts of every church, no matter their size.”

¹⁴ Stanley, Brian. *Christianity in the Twentieth Century*. Princetown University Press. 2018, 211.

Vaters also writes: “When I’m pushing for numerical growth, I preach, teach, disciple, manage and minister an entirely different way.... In fact, I don’t like myself when I’m in numerical growth mode.”¹⁵ He concludes, “Pushing for greater numbers at the cost of caring for people is too high a price to pay. Caring for people, even if it comes at the cost of numerical increase, is always the better choice.”

Ed Stetzer offers this advice: “the metrics that we frequently count – can be missionally deceptive.... The trick is counting what matters.”¹⁶ Stetzer advocates counting the following in the context of missional churches: “the Number of Gospel Relationships; ... the Number of Domains with Kingdom Influencers; ... the Number of Kingdom Imprints; ... the Number of New Believers; the Number of Disciple-Makers Raised and Sent”.

We can learn from these insights as we seek to sensitively determine what should be counted in the Bible translation movement.

(5) Vision 2025 and beyond milestones

We are only six years out from the ‘date’ in Vision 2025. Therefore, participants suggested these milestones ahead:

- All languages that need a translation started by 2025.
- A language program will be under way in every language that needs it by 2029.
- We can probably replace Vision 2025 with Vision 2033. Only half of the global effort will reach Vision 2025. The rest will need at least another 5 to 10 years. We are not going to reach Vision 2025, as hard as we may try, and as fruitful as it has been to embrace Vision 2025 values.
- ETEN’s¹⁷ Vision 2033 goals cover the remaining new starts, as well as aiming for the completion of Old Testament translations (with the goal of full Bibles).
- All 20,000+ languages (including dialects) have a translated Word, in portions or in full, as an act of worship to God by 2040.
- Down to zero languages without any Scripture is still a valid goal, but it needs to be counter-balanced with up to 4500 languages with full Bibles.
- ETEN’s full Bible goal and their goal of a second translation of a different type in the world’s top 100 languages are excellent.

Related milestones:

- More than 50% of translation specialists will come from the Global South.
- Measurable increase in financial contribution (say for instance by 2030 a full 50% of projects might not funded by the traditional Global North funders).

¹⁵ Vaters, Karl, ‘Caring or Counting? The Pastoral Dilemma, *Christianity Today* online, January 22, 2019.

¹⁶ Stetzer, Ed, ‘The Metrics of Mission: How to Count What Counts’. *Christianity Today* online, September 10, 2018.

¹⁷ ETEN stands for ‘Every Tribe Every Nation’ (<https://eten.org>).

- In 2-3 years, new curriculum and approaches for training for Bible translation has been tested and released across the globe.
- In 3-4 years, the key Bible translation organizational structures will operate like movements which enable greater participation by the global Church.
- In 5 years, Church denominations will be the leaders of the Bible translation movement and Bible agencies will recognize this shift and will be happy to play second fiddle.

Closing Challenge

The Old Testament prophet Zechariah stated: “This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Zech 4:6).

These words to Zerubbabel were for encouragement. While the strength of the workers rebuilding the temple failed because it was so strenuous (Neh. 4:10), their efforts would succeed because of the supernatural help that the Lord would provide by His Spirit. This is true when we genuinely seek to carry out God’s will: “...‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.” (2 Cor. 12:9 NIV)

In God’s mission, He is our strength and He has chosen his Church, which includes us, to achieve His purposes. The apostle Paul summarizes this well: “But this precious treasure – this light and power that now shine within us—is held in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies. So everyone can see that our glorious power is from God and is not our own.” (2 Cor 4:7 NLT)

Throughout this presentation, we’ve seen the broadening of our understanding of what we understand progress to be in the Bible translation movement and in the context of God’s mission. We’ve considered relevant milestones and how they could be theologically significant. We also want to take heed of church history. What looks like progress in one era can actually be regress in another. Therefore, learning and reflecting together within the Bible translation movement is a key to being faithful to God’s calling. We are in this together. And together, we seek to serve God’s eternal purposes. This is our privilege and joy.