

**The Journey Podcast / Wycliffe Global Alliance**  
**Episode 1 – January 2024**

**Interview transcript:** Dr. John Watters, former director of SIL and Wycliffe International (now called the Wycliffe Global Alliance). Interviewed by Jim Killam, Wycliffe Global Alliance, Fall 2023.

**Jim Killam, Wycliffe Global Alliance:**

You have such a unique perspective on this, obviously. I would be really interested to know how you see it has played out these past almost 25 years. That's a broad question, I know, but maybe we can start there and just say, what was your mindset going into this proposal or the paper you wrote in '99? And then in looking back, it's got to be quite astonishing.

**John Watters:**

Yes, it is astonishing. It still remains astonishing. Anyway ... I have to kind of learn how to keep my hands loose in a way. I haven't been engaged in a leadership role now since 2016. So trying to stay out of other people's way, so to speak. The younger generation, let them go where God is leading them to go. But for me personally, it was back in September of 1997. It became clear that the two presidents, the president of Wycliffe Bible Translators International and SIL International, were going to nominate me to their two boards to be the executive director of the two organizations. In those days, you were the executive director of both Wycliffe International and SIL.

So of course, I had been working in Africa for eight years as Africa area director for SIL and Wycliffe, and I felt like I had a sense -- not complete, but a fairly comprehensive sense -- of what we were trying to do in Africa and what could be done. There was a lot more to learn, a lot more to try.

But thinking about the International, it was kind of crazy. How do you get your mind around the globe? And I don't even know some of the parts of the world very well at all, especially Asia and Eurasia and so forth.

So that was in the back of my mind. And then there was the question of this thing called Partners with Nationals that Bernie May was experimenting with. And I'd been involved with him quite heavily in Africa because we had, I think, about the first 20 projects of what became the Seed Company were in Africa. So we were going to have a meeting in Huntington Beach about what should we do with this? Bernie was hoping that maybe they could be let loose a little to be like a skunkworks within Wycliffe and not be tied in this tiny little office down in the basement of the Wycliffe office in Huntington Beach.

So the person who was chairing the Wycliffe board at that time, Peter Ochs, sent us a book called "Built to Last" by Collins and Porras, and we were supposed to read it and have it help us

understand what was going on, but I didn't have any time to read, do more reading. I was running around. The day I knew I was flying, it was in October -- October 15 I see on my calendar, of 1997 -- flying from Nairobi to London to Los Angeles to be at these meetings in Huntington Beach. So I grabbed the book off of my desk, thinking *I'll just skim a couple of things so at least I sound like I know something about it*. And I started reading. You know how it is when you don't have time to read it, so you skim and hope you sound reasonably intelligent, reasonably informed. Anyway, so I started reading it and I couldn't put it down. I read it all the way reading between from Nairobi to London and all the way to ... Los Angeles.

What fascinated me, of course, is what they were studying was human organization and seeing how SIL and Wycliffe, how we're organized and what's happening in our world. And I had been in international meetings with area directors and vice presidents for the previous decade, and hearing all the groans and moans and problems and challenges and so forth. I read through the book and I started making notes. And it was during that time this idea of a big, hairy audacious goal, a BHAG ... I thought, well, what in the world would that look like for us?

By the end of that trip, I had this question of what would we have to do so that every language in the world either had a Bible or had at least the New Testament or had some portion of Scripture in their hands in this next generation? First I thought 2020, no 2025. We had this little deal back as SIL Wycliffe. There was somebody back, I think about 1983, "Every tribe by 85", so it was two years. We were going to do everything in two years. I said I didn't want this to become that kind of silly slogan that had no content at all if we're going to talk about a vision.

So that was ... for me, it was beginning more on the idea of developing a vision. So it was through that reading that I took the (idea), What would we have to do so that every language has a Bible or a New Testament or Scriptures or even has a program in progress? Maybe they don't quite have a Scripture yet, but they have something beginning by the year 2025. And that would be a generation. It would take a generation. It would be a prayer goal because it's not something that anybody, no central control mechanism is going to make happen.

**JK:**

You had research in hand by that point too, I think, from your predecessor that talked about 100 to 150 years that this could take, right?

**JW:**

Yeah. I worked with my predecessor. He asked me to look through the data we had. So that's when I (was) working with him. But basically it was, what I did for him was I realized, my goodness, at this rate it would be 125 to 150 years before we would see every ... and we knew by then probably half those languages would be gone anyway. So what is it that could change?

And I knew what we were doing was, we would be involved in it. We believed it was a great contribution to the community. And we're still working with that community now at the tail end of our lives. But it's a huge and significant investment in a community for us to send two people,

so to speak, to spend much of 10 years or 20 years of their life working with that community. But at that rate it was just going to be too long. It's just a question to ask us.

And what I found -- I thought, well, what's going to happen is people are going to have all ... I know, SIL and Wycliffe well, especially SIL, my colleagues, including myself (would say), "Aw, come on John, what are you talking about?"

Anyway, so all that stuff. And I know every question that I was asked practically were questions I would have asked at some time in my journey. It just happened to be I was where I was in my journey at that point. So I wasn't surprised by any of the questions. But what I was shocked by was when I first talked to the first person about it there at Huntington Beach, at the Wycliffe office, his response was, "Oh, I'd like to be part of that!" I said, "Oh, OK." ... So then a couple other people I mentioned it to there had the same kind of reaction. Then I had to go to the board meetings in Dallas and it was fascinating to watch. I said, OK, the two presidents are nominating me to be the next executive director for the two organizations. So the boards had wanted ... at one point, Frank Robbins, who was president of SIL, he said, "John, 15 minutes." It was not going to take much time. And I thought, OK.

But then I thought, I'm disappointed, 15 minutes? I'd like to talk a little more. But anyway, I thought, well, at least what I'm going to do is I'm going to say, OK, if you vote me to be executive director, this is the question I'm going to be asking.

It was fascinating to see what happened. What was going to be 15 minutes, we started with about, I suppose about 45 minutes or an hour left for that day. And on the Wycliffe board there were three or four people who were not members of Wycliffe or SIL. They were board members and they were pastors involved in various ways. They were non-Anglo Saxon, so they often sat there and didn't say much. They were from Africa or Asia or so forth. They were intimidated by all the Anglo Saxons who always had something to say about everything. So what was fascinating that day was that suddenly everybody had questions or comments. Everybody. I mean every single person, even those who never spoke hardly at a board meeting. And everybody had at least a couple of times they spoke. So we got to the end of the day and they said, I guess we need to talk about it continuing tomorrow. So we talked about it the next morning and finally finished after about an hour or so. So we spent a couple of hours in discussion. The board was engaged and I thought, *Well, this is more than I expected. This has really caught me by surprise.*

**JK:**

Was the discussion enthusiastic? Was it hesitant? What was the tone of it?

**JW:**

Enthusiastic. And also it inspired others to start having their own visions. What this could mean in my country, what this could mean here. In other words, it just let loose their own creativity.

It just caught me by surprise because I've been to so many international meetings with SIL and Wycliffe. It's a very cautious, careful thinking group of people. They're just not going to be dancing in the streets. And no one was dancing in the streets, but it was very supportive and encouraging.

What I expected at an international conference, well, is that they would let me have about half an hour, 45 minutes at the end of conference to say, OK, here's the new executive director that's going to take over. And we were planning this in March of 1999. Between those two times I had been able to process, I was stimulated to process what should I say? Provoked by some comments later by one board member. I'd better process this even more.

So I processed it with about 125 people. Most of them were in Africa, but there were Asian people working in Asia, people working in the Americas, people working in Eurasia, adding all kinds of interesting comments and questions. And that's why in that paper there's a whole series of what it is not. It was a response to these kinds of statements that people were making and I wanted to clarify that's not in my mind, that's not what I'm thinking, that's not what the Lord put on my heart. So we came to the '99 conference, planning for it in March, and I just showed in my paper, this is what I've written up and that I would like to hand this out for my last 45-minute bit. And Frank Robbins and John Bendor Samuel, who were the two presidents of the two organizations, they're talking with the rest of the people on the committee that were planning the conference and said, "You know what? I think we ought to make this the first presentation."

Which just took me by surprise. "Just a second. This is going to get a little out of hand." So anyway, as we started preparing for that, in my mind, my spirit, I was thinking I know this organization, especially SIL side with all the scholars and academics and so forth, of which I participate. And I'm one of those guys. Like I said, I would ask these questions, too. "Are you crazy?" Anyway, depending where you are in life.

So I was expecting that what was going to happen was that I would present it and everybody would say "That's a great idea. Now let's spend the next eight years talking about this and see what we'll do." That was kind of my expectation. I was presenting a vision and let's talk about the vision over the coming years as John's giving leadership and then we'll do something.

To my surprise, the committee that was put together — they put Katie Barnwell to chair it, and came out with a proposal. It wasn't directly the question, but it was based on that question that we would pursue such a Vision 2025 statement that was made in 1999. So basically when I started working as executive director, started on the ground running, so to speak, the call was there and now what sense do you make of this?

And it was clear that one thing I knew in my heart, that this cannot be done from central office. Anything that is this global or even in many places, we know what happens with centralized controls. It can kill what the Spirit might be doing. There were a couple of times, a couple of my colleagues, my vice presidents and area directors and so forth, there were a couple of them that

really wanted to turn the whole apple cart upside down and I said "We can't do that, either. We can't just turn the apple cart and try to put it back together. None of us are competent in doing that. What we have to do is work with what we have, what God is doing in the lives of our members."

Overall, people hung in there. So all ... along the way I have been surprised how God has used it. I tried hard early-on to let people know that yes, urgency is one of the key pillars here. But urgency doesn't mean haste. It doesn't mean speed. But it means how do you focus your strategies and your attention on what you're doing? Do you try to keep from going down rabbit trails or things that are tertiary? Sometimes you need to do things that are secondary, but especially tertiary things — Let's focus on the main things. Let's allow for some secondary work.

For me, it included of course, right at the core, Bible translation, also academic research and also literacy. Those were kind of the three things we'd all inherited. And I thought those could be continued to be pursued. But obviously over time it became more and more ...

It started going beyond the boundaries of Wycliffe, and other people becoming engaged, which, praise God, all I could say was, especially as I had less and less executive leadership, which stopped ... in December 2007, just kind of let go. Even before then, God was teaching me how to let go and see what people would do with it. In fact, that was a question right at the end of conference. A person asked, OK, we've all agreed to this. Tell us now what we should be doing as we go back to our organizational units, our entities as we called them.

I said, "You know, I can't tell you what to tell them. What I would ask you to do is go back and tell them what you have experienced here, what you heard here, and ask the question of yourselves in your entity: What would we have to do here? What does it mean for us? And you'll get a lot of interesting feedback."

There's no other organization or company, even a commercial company that has 1,000 projects going all at the same time. You just don't do that. And yet that's what we had. We had 1,000 cultural human change projects going on around the world. And even two of the languages that are next door to each other and are basically related linguistically, they are not necessarily the same context. It depends on individuals, leadership capacity within a given community and so forth. So each one of these you have to work through these questions, and I can't do that. But we will continue to stimulate from the center. We'll continue to stimulate, provoke, encourage. And that's what we did. I would go around, visit places and sometimes I was on the floor for a conference at a couple of entities for six to eight hours with people asking questions. And sometimes I had to remind them -- quite often, actually -- that, well, the question you're asking is really for your Wycliffe organization to answer. Most of them were Wycliffe USA members that were asking these questions. I'd say, you have to talk to the people in Huntington Beach about that or Orlando about that, depending what time ... it was in the process. But because it wasn't an SIL Wycliffe International question.

I'd have to pray to the Lord because I can be a combative person. I work more in the area of competition and control. My wife has helped me modify some of those. But trying to just listen and recognize that the person who may be antagonistic, that's fine. I may probably never be able to satisfy them with an answer. But I need to answer the question because everybody else is listening. And there's a whole bunch of people who, if they understand the answer that I give them, will be persuaded to continue to see what God would do -- even if this other person remains antagonistic, is trying to win the hearts of those who others who are listening to the process. And that God's Spirit. ... so I had to keep asking God's Spirit to just give me peace, keep me calm, don't allow me to get agitated.

**JK:**

I'm curious about that. You said you were sort of a combative personality. What kind of a step of faith was it for you as a new leader to propose a vision this radical or this radically different? Was that out of character for you or did it feel like that's what you were there to do?

**JW:**

The vision, in a certain sense, what I was reading Porras and Collins ... what it was radical in was its scope, I guess. That we're taking on the world, but that we were going to try to see national colleagues take greater and greater ... which was basically saying the church in these places would take increasing responsibility. But it really had to be personalized in the individuals who were going to be trained and hired to be part of the process.

So it wasn't a sudden shock to my system, except that I never stood up before so many people, my colleagues, 500 of them, sitting there and saying, "This is what I'm proposing."

END OF PART 1