

The Journey Podcast / Wycliffe Global Alliance
Episode 2 – February 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. Vision 2025.

Part 2 (with a few seconds of overlap from part 1)

John Watters:

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."

But like I said, I also had that cushion time between '97 and '99 when I processed it with about 125 people. So I got all these responses, and most of them – people engaged with it. Even if they didn't like it, they engaged with it. And they asked relevant questions so that I could process those in my spirit.

One person wrote and said, "Well, John, I will agree to be part of this process if you can tell me what the architecture of this vision would be." And I just wrote back and said, "You know, you can't tell the architecture until you even know what the building is going to be about. Look at it. What are the parts of the building that need to be there? So we're in process here. We're going to see how God's Spirit takes us through this process step by step."

And he has. Certain things have happened that I wouldn't have supported, but God had his way and God can work through, I realize, even my own foolishness sometimes, or my own inadequacies. God works through them and beyond them. And what God has done coming up to now, it's just extraordinary what God has done.

Jim Killam, Wycliffe Global Alliance:

I know you would attribute a lot of that enthusiasm that you found to the Holy Spirit moving, but was there something about attaching a date to it that might have ... just turned a light on for people? What do you think about that?

JW:

Yeah, the date was an interesting discussion. I think ... having that date for many people gave it some seriousness -- that this is something that we could think about and ask about. And I tried

to continue to say, "Listen, I'm not saying that" ... What I saw immediately coming out of the conference, there were kind of two responses. One, a bunch of young people in the UK. See, this was May '99. So the next month in the UK, they were having this big Christian fest or something in UK. The young people who had been involved with Wycliffe, who were like Wycliffe kids, I guess, they heard this and they changed their booth and Vision 2025 came up there. And the reason they said is "Because this is a God thing. This is not something we're going to do, this is a God thing."

On the other side, I saw people saying ... using this as kind of a sledgehammer -- 2025. The temptation is -- maybe more of a vain concept -- that we are going to do this for God. The way I would summarize some of the statements that "This is what we're going to do for God."

One, the youth encouraged me. The other one gave me caution ... If God doesn't want to do this, that's his business. This is what we're ... we're asking this question and saying, "God, this is the question we're asking. We are going to give time and energy to it, and we want you to lead us. And if there's other paths you want us to go, that's fine, but make it clear to us what we should be doing here as we continue on down this path."

So eventually, early-on there, I had to begin to say, Look at 2025. It's not a goal in the sense that we are going to measure ourselves day-by-day to that goal. But it encapsulates a number of things. First of all, it's a prayer item that this is out in the future and we are only going to get there through prayer, through God's leadership in this process.

Secondly, it's a challenge for us as a set of organizations. In terms of our personnel, my predecessor, Steve Sheldon, had shown -- I think it was even at that conference -- we looked at the curve of personnel and we could see that recruiting had not gone up in the 1990s, didn't look like it was going to continue to go up, and it would probably shrink. And that this is the time now for the generation that is currently engaged. We have learned a lot that we can now pass on to the next generation, which will include increasingly people from Africa and Asia and Eurasia, not just Anglo Saxons or Westerners, but it's going to include the global church.

The third thing we saw ... God is raising up a global church in ways we had never anticipated. This was already going on in the 1980s, '90s, but now it was becoming more and more visible. And so this prayer, this 2025, is a way to think about -- probably in 25 years, much of this work is going to have to be done by people outside of our organizations, by the church that's growing around the world. It's not going to be just SIL and Wycliffe doing this thing, although we still remain -- I mean, God's decided to continue to use Wycliffe and SIL, which, praise God, he has.

So early on, starting in 2003, we had our first senior kind of a leaders meeting. And I wanted to see what progress we'd made. And I figured that I was a person of little faith in a certain sense because I thought, well, probably we'd see a little wrinkle-in-time change. But when we really got some statistics, wow, there was something like 100 projects that started in the last two years, which shocked me because it was kind of stagnant at that point. And then over time, the next few years we started trying to point out that, OK, it looks like we're on a projected it will

probably be about 2038 that we'll see every language. And of course, between now and then there'll be certain languages that will just die out. We were focusing on languages that were viable for translation, too. So that left out about 1,000 languages that just were on the edge of survival.

Later I got into discussions with some, like with the YWAM leadership, about how they could do with these small languages. Their students could probably go out and do things that they never thought of before.

But back to just trying to keep our eyes on the question, but recognizing that God may not accomplish -- year by year, it kept showing out as 2038, 2038.

So that's kind of where I've been at and I know right now, some people are asking questions like "What if 2025 comes and we haven't done it?" Well, it never has been about "we've done it". It's supposed to be about what God is doing through us. And if we don't hit it in 2025, if God allows us to see this in 2038, what's our response going to be? It's going to be hallelujah, praise God! 13 years or 15 years or whatever side God is looking. However God wants to do this.

It's not supposed to be a sledgehammer. It's supposed to be something that we're not supposed to be guilty about. It's a time of prayer, of using the resources and knowledge God has poured into our organizations that can be passed on to the next generation of the global church. And prayer, prayer, prayer, through this whole process and seeing what more new things can happen.

It's been extraordinary to see what God has done in certain places. Absolutely extraordinary.

JK:

It's had to be on one side, interesting, on another side, frustrating for you to watch people take this notion and run a million directions with it. Including some you wouldn't agree with.

JW:

Yeah, absolutely. Let's put it this way. I've had to generally be quiet, don't step in there. It's not going to be profitable for me or for others for me to step in and try to correct them, to organize them. But yes, you see people interpreting it. I knew as soon as people left the conference it was going to get interpreted in all kinds of ways. And that's why I got so many responses, too, and had to say, "Well, just read this document, you'll see that that is answered and here's ..." Then I'd just tell them what the answer was. And you can look and see that's what we were talking about.

But yes, there are decisions made that I wouldn't have made. But like I said, I think realizing that God is the one who would grow these organizations together. Every organization has just like every nation, culture. We have a lifetime. We're not here forever. An organization can come and go. And if the time for one organization comes up, that's fine.

God has blessed Wycliffe. God has blessed SIL. We continue to be there. And (he has) blessed many other organizations.

JK:

It feels like, though, this was a primary catalyst for decentralization of this movement too, though.

JW:

Yeah, especially as you begin to talk about the global church. My wife and I, we had experience there in Africa, and I had experience across Africa watching what was going on in translation. As area director, sometimes certain things caused me to be enthusiastic and quite hopeful, and other things made me less hopeful. One person had come to me and said it was a great idea. He'd heard this. He said, "I've learned what a movement was from" – I can't remember who it was -- "But a movement is when you can no longer count it." And I said, "That's great. That's really what we're looking for is a movement in Bible translation where it becomes so much embedded in the world, the culture of Christ followers, that you can count some, but you're never going to know all that's going on."

And in fact, most of the time I was in my role of ED (executive director), I always knew that what we were counting was not fully counted. It would give you some ideas, some proximity, some approximate idea of what was happening. And I had another colleague say to me, who had been experienced in a high-level technology corporation, he had been a VP in Europe and so forth. He said, "Well, John, you probably know about 4 percent of what's going on in the organizations."

When he first said that to me, I was kind of offended. "I know more than that." But as I traveled around and saw more and more, I thought you know, he was more generous than reality. I know about 0.4 percent of what's going on. What's going on, when you take all your colleagues and all the people around the world, it's just extraordinary. It's a blessing. It's a privilege that I had to be able to see things going on that most of our colleagues don't get to see. They see what's going on right in front of them and next door. But to travel around and see what God was doing in these other places was an extraordinary privilege.

So recognize that there is so much going on that we don't know, and I'm just glad to know what we do know and praise God for that. And when people make a decision that I don't like, I had to learn to pray, learn to use prayer to calm my spirit. In other words, pray for that person rather than be angry and upset with them. Just pray that "God, you'll bless that person, bless their family, bless them in their particular ... give them wisdom and understanding as they're pursuing these various approaches." That calmed my spirit when I could just turn it over to the Lord and not get into some kind of bitterness inside my heart, because that could easily happen.

I can see where people who start an organization and they're the godfather, so to speak. They hold on to it and never let it go. And then decisions are made. (People) can be bitter rivals. You

have these bad experiences in the Christian community sometimes where this takes place. So God's protected me from those. It's just been his grace at work.

JK:

I was going to ask that. How does your own faith look different today? Through the act of obedience you did with laying out this vision and then seeing it through these early days or shepherding it, whatever word we want to use. So you answered part of that, but what do you look back and say, what did God do in my life with this? And what does that all mean?

JW:

Well, yeah, I realize probably I can't even know all that God did in my life through that in certain ways. But certainly the things that I can put my finger on, certainly he's only strengthened my confidence in him. That he's going to accomplish what he desires to accomplish in his time. That this was not -- what he brought to my attention through this process -- was not just some human energy, so to speak, human rationality or something, but it was actually a work of the Spirit. I learned to be careful to make claims that I'm speaking for the Spirit and maybe you're not -- that kind of stuff. I learned that that's not my place.

And in fact, the Spirit sometimes may be speaking through more than one person and going in different directions, which is always kind of a struggle. It's one of those conundrums you have in the Christian faith that God can work in multiple ways and sometimes they may seem contradictory at that point.

So I think God certainly deepened my confidence in him, deepened my confidence that he can work through anybody, particularly my brothers and sisters in Christ. But even through people who are not brothers and sisters in Christ. I've seen him work through others to make things happen and accomplish things.

So let's put it this way: I'm not worried about 2025. When I think of vision 2025, I just rejoice. God gives me great joy and peace in it. I suppose he has deepened my peace and joy. ... I recognize I'm finite and I can handle so much, but after a while I just need to be able to step back from it. That was good to be able to just step further back and let God let everybody else do what they think they're doing to contribute to Vision 2025. And also to the whole group of people, communities that are just inaccessible, where you just can't do it yourself. You can't stimulate activity internally because there's no one there who's a believer who wants to stick their neck out doing something like Bible translation. So trusting God for those communities -- that God knows who they are, God knows what's happening there. And depending on just leaning into God's grace and God's love that's exercised around the world despite the horrors that we see day to day.

JK:

How would you advise an Alliance leader who might be in a similar position to what you were 25, 30 years ago, who has a radical idea?

JW:

Well, I would test it like I did with those 125 people. Test it and see. And if ... first of all, test it with your closest colleagues, closest brothers and sisters in Christ. Test it with a few people beyond that circle to see what God might do with it. And in that process, God will continue to clarify certain ideas, certain things. I'm speaking from my experience. Things got more clear, clearer than they were at the outset. It was too broad, let's say, and I got greater clarification.

And then, test it whatever the resources that are going to be needed to carry it out. Are there resources? And if there aren't, you have to pray, trust God to raise up the resources. Or maybe that leader is the one-man band.

But it's really more likely if it's got a big vision, it's going to take more than just one person. And to carry it lightly but enthusiastically and consistently, that's another one. You can't overshare the vision. I've been trying to tell my pastor locally, he's got this vision. I say with your staff, and particularly the congregation, continually remind us what the vision of the church is, because if you don't, we'll fill it in ours pretty quickly.

And so if you have this vision that God's given you and others want to join you in it, keep reminding yourselves what the vision is and that it's really a vision from God. And to hold it lightly and to let God develop it in ways sometimes that you would not have expected it to develop.