

## **The Journey Podcast**

### **Episode 6 – Terry Dehart and Christy Liner talk about ProgressBible and Vision 2025 September 2024**

#### *Interview transcript*

Wycliffe Global Alliance:

I'd kind of like to just start with what exactly is Progress Bible? Because I think a lot of our Alliance organisations may have heard of it, but aren't particularly clear on what it is as an entity. So could you guys explain that for me a little?

Terry Dehart:

What we do is we take data from well over 100 sources and try to represent each month where the Bible translation move stands. We use graphs, maps, numbers, and one of your earlier (podcast) guests said "A movement is when you can no longer count it." So I'm looking forward to that day when I can't count it anymore. My job in particular is to publish several web pages a month that show all this, but it's also so they can be used for analysis.

But I also have to make sure our data is as accurate as possible. People tell us things that aren't quite accurate all the time, and we have to make sure we have the best possible representation. So that's basically my job, is to publish it and make sure things are accurate as we can get them.

WGA:

And Christy, maybe you could explain how this fits under SIL because I'm not sure that's always clear, either.

Christy Liner:

ProgressBible is stewarded by SIL. And so, we are all SIL team members, but our focus is predominantly ProgressBible. And SIL is really just one of, like Terry said, hundreds of organisations that contribute data to Progress Bible.

Terry Dehart:

And I think one of the reasons why it's stewarded by SIL is, I think at the very beginning, we had the best data. But things have grown way beyond that.

WGA:

Yeah. You guys are just a compiler of a wide variety of sources, it sounds like. And it's probably interesting because this data is not coming in in the same format or the same columns or anything like that, right?

Terry Dehart:

Correct. I have a team member who worries about all that.

WGA:

Maybe that's you know, I was going to ask you, the hardest part of, of this job of compiling data like this—is it that there's just so much in so many formats coming from so many directions? Or what else is challenging?

Terry Dehart:

Well, I would say it's the lack of a common dictionary. Sometimes you're told things that aren't quite what you asked. One of my favorites is we're told 'We have a Bible in this language', and you start digging down and you find out it is a children's Bible, or a set of Bible stories, or a Bible that's half in one language and half in another language.

So we have the same words, but not the same dictionary. We want all 1,189 chapters and all verses in that language.

WGA:

Yeah, I think from outside there's an assumption that, OK, you just count all the Bibles and then how hard could it be, right? But then there's so many variations and so much challenge to this. The most fun part of this, I mean, we'll get to the numbers in a second here. But what excites both of you about what comes out of ProgressBible?

Terry Dehart:

Well, I just love seeing the good news. The team member who looks at the data and actually transforms it so it's all nice and regularized—he actually gets to see it first, but I'm always the second person to see the great news. Like earlier this year, we hit a point where half of all known languages had Scripture. That's the first time that we know of in recorded history that half of all languages had at least some Scripture.

Now there's still a long way to go, but that's a great milestone to see. And we shared that widely. I told everybody that would sit and listen to me. We published it on our website. Good news—it's the best part of the job.

Christy Liner:

I think for me, getting to help people make more informed decisions. The data that we bring in is actually pretty complex, but our job is to try to make it simple. And that's not always easy. And sometimes it can kind of backfire because you try to make it simple and there can be misinterpretation on the simplicity.

But our job is to try to simplify the complex. And so getting to help people maybe who aren't data or analysis people make better decisions in their day-to-day work. That's what I really enjoy in the role.

WGA:

With Vision 2025. I know that we've done some podcasts and stories about that and what it is and what it isn't, but the numbers do kind of jump out this time that we're under 1,000 languages that need translation to begin. What feels especially significant in relation to Vision 2025?

Terry Dehart:

Well, I am a numbers guy, so I've been watching that and wondering, is it going to be this month? Is it going to be next month? When is that actually going to happen? But then I went back and listened to the previous podcasts and it gave me a really ... those are really rich podcasts. I really enjoyed listening to all of them because it just provides such a bigger perspective on what we're trying to accomplish here.

When John Watters talked about his original perspective looking out 100 years or more to even get started everywhere and seeing how that has just completely turned around. What a profound success. I'm really moved.

Christy Liner:

The thing is, is that, yeah, we're accelerating so rapidly. I think when I first started tracking the remaining needs, for me personally back in 2020, and I remember doing some forecasting that it was going to be just decades away to actually get everything started. And just in the past four or five years, how much things have changed is tremendous.

So looking at Vision 2025, I mean, there are some major gaps still, of us actually starting like, sign languages, for example. There's a major lag in getting all the sign languages started. Or even starting all of the languages in East Asia. But if you just look at it as a whole, in a way it actually feels like maybe it's within reach. Maybe it's not so crazy. And it used to feel like there was just no way. So that's exciting.

WGA:

You know, I was looking at the numbers that you guys provided this week and checking back between 2021 and this year. And it just seems like we came roaring out of COVID as a movement. Would that be accurate to say that?

Terry Dehart:

Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. And when you look at like the big five that Wycliffe talks about, Nigeria was replaced by Cameroon. And I looked at Cameroon and I said, well, why did they bother replacing it? Cameroon's just out there in the quiet, in the messy numbers at the bottom, with five or six other countries about the same size.

So that shows that ... I kind of thought of it as a medium five in the mediums category. And that's a sign of real progress, where you don't really have five huge targets that really need a lot of focus.

WGA:

Other things that jumped out at me. Six billion people having the full Bible now, which is obviously a huge majority of the world. And I think maybe sometimes when people see 1,000 languages left, they don't realize how small a number of people that is now.

Terry Dehart:

Yes. One of the things we're also looking at is people that don't have their initial goal met. And what we see there is the large languages and the medium-sized languages. There's continued growth in them. And the small languages, they continue to decline and fall off. But yes, 6 billion people. It's amazing.

Christy Liner:

You know, I came into this with understanding that Vision 2025 was us starting all the remaining languages that don't have Bible translation. I later learned that that was only a small component, a sliver of what Vision 2025 really was. And over time, it just morphed that this was the one thing that was measurable. But what all of us are going for is community impact and transformation and Scripture usage.

And so just want to, I guess, remind all of us that Scripture existence or even sometimes previous existence doesn't mean that a community has been transformed by the gospel. And so just, you know, wanting to remind all of us to just redirect or keep in mind that the real goal is people being moved and transformed by the gospel.

Whereas Vision 2025 is really just potentially a leading indicator, but it's not like the indicator that actually tells us if this is happening.

WGA:

I was thinking, as you said that—Terry had mentioned this too—that when you lose the ability to count something, maybe it's a movement. And how God is so much bigger than statistics and so much more than we can count. And obviously there are ways to measure impact, but I don't know that any of them are very precise.

Terry Dehart:

Yeah. And one of the things that I also learned in listening to previous podcasts was how much this changed from being a North American enterprise to a global enterprise. The global church was given the challenge, the global churches stepped up, and that's part of what we can't count anymore. If a church in some country is doing a translation, we may not even know about it.

Now they may partner with an organization. Then we would know about it. But that's part of it being uncountable is, the global church took the challenge and ran with it.

WGA:

Can you talk a little bit about the data sharpening initiative? You guys had mentioned that to me before, but I think it might be useful for people to understand what that is.

Christy Liner:

When we first created ProgressBible, what we did is we made some what I called generous assumptions. We made an assumption that every single language has need for Scripture, unless we have information that tells us otherwise. OK, so, one piece of information that would tell us otherwise is if, let's say, the children aren't speaking the language anymore. If it is a language that's no longer vital, then we would say, OK, we would recommend—and it doesn't always happen this way, but we would recommend that the Bible translation movement kind of focuses energy and effort on languages that are vital and still being spoken by children. But there is over a thousand languages where we just didn't have good information, so we assumed, OK, the language is vital and there is need there, and we're just going to leave it on the Vision 2025 list.

The same can be true about multilingualism. With the rise of multilingualism, very few monolingual communities are left. At the time, unless we knew otherwise we assumed, OK, this community is going to use Scripture in their mother tongue or in their L1. But what we kind of estimated at the time, I'll say a couple of years ago, there's probably hundreds of languages that are on our Vision 2025 list, but if we had accurate information, they probably wouldn't be, because of one of those two reasons.

And so the data sharpening initiative was just an attempt to start to collect better information on every language so that we can really try to highlight where the real needs do exist and hopefully divert energies, organizational energies, to those languages where there are actual needs.

Terry Dehart:

One of the things that's also come from that is a lot of communities have actually expressed a wish for translation to occur in their community, in their language. And that's one of the things that really helps boost things forward is with the local church, the local community is, participating in the process and not just having people come from the outside.

And so that's one of the other points that is collected. Is, is the church or the community looking for sort of activity?

WGA:

Yeah. Which again, your challenge is greater because you're not just dealing with the large Western Bible translation organizations, but you're dealing with local churches. You're dealing with movements everywhere now, where it is harder to get your arms around it. But again, what a movement of God, huh?

Terry Dehart:

Yes. Yes it is.

WGA:

I want to give you a chance to answer a devil's advocate question. That would be: OK, we're almost to 2025. We're seeing the numbers drop, drop, drop. Are we manipulating these numbers in order to achieve a goal, or what's really happening? And I know that's not the case, but I would love for you guys to explain why that's not the case.

Terry Dehart:

Well, I love numbers and I love them the best when they're accurate. And when I look at the numbers, I don't expect vision 2025 to hit zero in 2025. **The low-hanging fruit has been picked. We're down to the hard ones.** You look at the big five. Nigeria was a great step forward. It fell out of the big five. We still see a lot of progress in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea. But Christy already mentioned East Asia and sign languages. That's hard. **When you look at East Asia, it's flat. There's been almost no change since 2020. And we need a movement of God, full stop. We've done everything we can think of and it's flat. So now what? We need God to intervene.**

And again, going back to some of the earlier podcasts where it talked about this being more of a challenge to the global church. Yes, we measure it. Yes, the numbers are going down rapidly, but **this is a challenge to the global church. So, if you're listening to this podcast and you're part of the global church, you're part of the challenge. What can you do? What can we do together? How can we cooperate? What can God show us?**

Christy Liner:

When Vision 2025 first started being, let's say, tracked, you know, after it was envisioned, and then tracked or dreamt up and then tracked—I mean, **we knew that we were overestimating the need because we knew there's communities that exist that are very multilingual, prefer access to Scripture in the language of wider communication. And we knew that there are communities that the languages have shifted, the communities have shifted to a different language. But we didn't have data on it. But we intentionally overestimated in that way, because we wouldn't have wanted to take any languages off the list without having data to back it up. So we've known that all along. And as we've been working towards Vision 2025, the remaining-needs list has been big enough that it has been OK that there's some bad data on there. We just couldn't quite pick out which one it is.**

Now that the list is getting smaller and smaller and we're under a thousand languages, this is where we're saying, OK, it is really important that what's on there is good information, because organisations are kind of starting to bump into each other quite a bit more. Right? It used to be there was just such an abundance of need out there that organisations didn't even realize another organization was working in the same country.

And now it's like, oh, both two organisations are working maybe with the same language community, just in different cities, not realizing it. That sort of thing's happening all the time. And so just more and more, we're realizing it's time to really clarify the need and sharpen the data as much as possible.

WGA:

Yeah. And to be fair, I think I remember times when the number went up, when we thought, oh, sign languages, there's a whole lot of those we didn't count. So it's bounced around for a while. But it's getting to this exciting point where, like you said, you're getting more and more precise. And now we can really see that number diminishing.

You guys have mentioned the big five a couple of times. It might be useful to list who those are. Maybe a comment or two about those and why those are the challenge they are.

Terry Dehart:

Well, the big five used to be East Asia, Indonesia, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea and the global Deaf. This year, Nigeria was taken off the list and replaced with Cameroon. And the reason they were the big five is if you add up the numbers, that was the largest number of languages left to go. And so if you graph it out, you see five groups up high and a lot of little lines at the bottom. You can't make anything out.

Well, if you look at that same graph over the last five years, you see Nigeria just ... it's almost like the need fell off a cliff. And this gets mentioned, [it's on the Wycliffe \(USA\) site](#) about some of the things that happened there, like the Aminci Cluster project. But you also see Global Partners, I see Seed Company, you see SIL. All three of those organisations have increased what they're doing in Nigeria. If you look at Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, that's much more incremental progress. People keep working, the numbers keep going down, you keep making progress. Christy has talked a lot about Indonesia and how what a case that is. Because in Indonesia it's very common to see comments saying, Well, they would like Scripture in their language, but it's also very common for churches to use Indonesian in the church. So do we need to translate it or not? That's going to be a tough question we're going to have to answer. The global Deaf. That was a surprise to me. I've been volunteering this role for about six and a half years, and it was a complete shock to discover hundreds of sign languages. Some are national and some are very small. That's a real challenge. That is a very difficult process. And I already mentioned East Asia and how we're not seeing progress there. That's a real challenge.

WGA:

There was a large drop this year and the number of people needing translation to start. I know the language numbers too, but the number of people was huge. And there were a couple of languages, I think they're in places we can't talk about. But is there anything we could say about that?

Terry Dehart:

It's very easy for those things to jump up and down, because if you lose two people on a project, all of a sudden the number would jump right back up. But there are some very large languages in that area of the world, and so a very small change can have a very large difference there. And that's part of the challenge of moving the needle in East Asia.

Christy Liner:

I just want to clarify, both like in the Indonesia case or in East Asia, **what we aren't doing as ProgressBible is saying, This community has a need or this community doesn't. We are compiling the information where we've gathered the best information that helps that come to light. I just want to clarify that, because what we don't want to communicate is that we're sitting behind a desk in North America, you know, making a decision that this community we support Scripture translation and this one we don't.**

There are some times where it's not always black and white. That is one of the challenges. **Sometimes it's just not black and white. And sometimes we have differing opinions from the field of what the need really is. And so that's where it gets tricky. But we are doing our best to just compile the information and bring to light whatever the best recommendation is.**

Terry Dehart:

Christy mentioned overestimating. In a case like that, we just live with the ambiguity and say, Well, if this is overestimated, it's overestimated. We're not just going to unilaterally decide for people.

WGA:

Right. We can be very clear that ProgressBible is not driving the movement. I'm sure you guys are being consulted at times just on some of these statistical questions, but just being able to provide what you guys do helps give clarity and direction and strategy to individual churches and organizations, right?

Terry Dehart:

Yeah. **A significant part of what we're trying to do is give the best information so people can make the best decisions and actually cooperate with each other. And Christy talked about competing accidentally. We're trying to eliminate that as much as possible.**

WGA:

Anything else that you guys would want to communicate to a Wycliffe Global Alliance audience? Our audience is largely leaders of organisations in the Alliance. What else would you like them to know?

Christy Liner:

I think the other thing ... I alluded to this briefly earlier in our conversation, but just that, you know, since Vision 2025 was dreamt of, you know, it shifted to what can we actually track and measure, which is the existence, the starting of Scripture translation. And **what we really dream and hope is that the movement will shift to what Scripture is actually getting used and what community impact are we seeing?**



One of the things that we've been seeing—I've been working with a couple different researchers in a couple different countries—of what actually Scripture usage we're seeing. So we all want to measure community impact, but we know that's very difficult. But starting a translation is very easy in terms of measuring it. What would be a little bit more ideal is if we measure what Scripture actually gets used. **Usage doesn't equal community impact, but it gets closer than a translation being started. Right? So, Scripture usage is kind of the newer thing that we're saying, OK, we really want to track and measure this.**

Anecdotally, for years there have been research like the [SURAM Report](#). You might be familiar with that. It was done in Papua New Guinea. We've had several others of those kinds of research done throughout the world, and what we generally see as a very general statement, maybe 30 percent gets used well, 30 percent is used a little and 30 percent is not used hardly at all. Or 33 percent. You break it up into thirds. And for some people, that might feel really disappointing that there's only 33 percent or a third of the translation that goes on that really does actually get used well.

And one of the first responses to that is, Well, we're doing something wrong. Either the Scripture engagement wasn't done well or maybe literacy wasn't done well. We need to do ... Or a Bible translation. Or the church didn't own it or wasn't involved. Everybody who's in a different camp is going to have their reason of why Scripture is not used well.

And what newer research is showing is that actually, it's not that anybody's done anything wrong. It's that when a church is well-established and formed using one language, if they're using a language of wider communication, if they're well established, they're unlikely to switch to use the mother tongue Scripture. And that doesn't mean they don't want it. That doesn't mean they don't appreciate the Scripture and honor it. It just means that the patterns have been well developed, and it's very hard to change the patterns after many years. And so what that means is maybe there are other activities that can be done outside of just straight Scripture translation that will have more impact. And the communities that are like unreached people groups where Scripture will get introduced for the first time, along with the gospel, that's where we are going to see the most likelihood of Scripture actually being adopted.

Those are generalizations. There are definitely exceptions to the rule, but those are just kind of broad generalizations that I think are really important for us to consider when we're considering starting new projects. Is the church really well established already using Scripture? Do we think that they will actually make the switch, or are they an unreached people group that discipleship along with translation and evangelism, can all happen simultaneously? Those are going to be the greatest likelihood of engagement.

Terry Dehart:

I'm a numbers guy. I've managed projects. I like to see incremental progress. It's great that we've started in these places. **We need to see incremental progress towards the goal and the end goal, as Christy described, we want to see people actually engaging with the**

Scripture, having it transform their lives, having it transform the culture. But as a project manager, you also want to see, OK, are we getting there? I don't want a surprise at the end. We want to see incremental progress. And that's one of the shifts that I'm seeing in ProgressBible is we're starting to measure that incremental progress.

WGA:

Yeah. I was thinking it would be easy to sit at any point in history and criticize those a generation before, based on what we know today, but they didn't have that information. And so everyone's working on their best available information and strategies, and obviously God has used it all.

Christy Liner:

I actually always find that fascinating. When you do look back in history and think of all of the very poor strategies that have developed over the years, and yet the gospel still prevails. Even through things like colonialism, the gospel has still prevailed. Somehow the Lord still moves forward. And so yeah, it's humbling and also reassuring that some of our strategies today, we're going to look back in 20 years and maybe feel a bit of embarrassment of the way we've moved things forward. And yet God will still prevail.

WGA:

On behalf of the Alliance, I do want to thank you both and thank ProgressBible for the work you do. It's so useful for all of our organizations and for the Alliance as a whole. So it's much appreciated. I know these numbers are coming out monthly. Do you want to give a pitch for how people can get the Snapshot every month?

Terry Dehart:

We have a public website called Progress.Bible. We update that every quarter and anybody on the planet can get it.

Christy Liner:

If someone wants to sign up to the monthly Snapshot, the best thing to do is email us at [progress-bible@sil.org](mailto:progress-bible@sil.org). And I would say not just if they want to sign up for the monthly Snapshot. That would be great. That's going to give them the kind of global aggregated view. But a lot of our users, what they really want is to be able to look into the data we have on one individual language and drill down to say what Scripture exists, who's working there, who's worked there in the past, what's the population, all of that information you can get much more drilled down.

And likewise, a lot of our users, what they really want is to contribute data so that all of the other organizations know what they're doing. And so we're not unintentionally duplicating effort. So we ask for both. Go to ProgressBible to consume information and also give information., so all of the other organizations have the best knowledge of what you're doing.

Of course we do protect sensitivity. If there's sensitive information we'll protect that. But either way, reach out to us at [progress-bible@sil.org](mailto:progress-bible@sil.org).

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