

The Journey Podcast – Episode 5: Vision 2025's Impact  
Interview with Dr. Bryan Harmelink / July 2024

Interview transcript

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Phil Prior

Hello and welcome again to The Journey podcast from the Wycliffe Global Alliance. I'm Phil Prior, I'm the director for communication with the Wycliffe Global Alliance,

Jim Killam

and I'm Jim Killam. I'm the managing editor. I'm part of the communication team for the Wycliffe Global Alliance.

Phil

In this episode, we're continue doing our series, our occasional series on the topic of vision 2025. And look back at that vision that was cast in 1999 that said that every language that needs Bible translation to begin could see that happen by the year 2025.

Jim

Yeah. If you've listened to some of our earlier episodes on this topic, you know that Vision 2025 was not intended as a calendar goal or a deadline. It's more a realization, back in 1999, that God was calling the Bible translation movement to some new thinking, new strategies, especially some new ways of collaborating.

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Phil

On that topic This episode features a fascinating conversation that Jim had with Dr Bryan Harmelink. For those of you that don't know Bryan, he's the Alliance's Director for Collaboration and really is one of the world's best thinkers when it comes to Bible translation movements and the worldwide church. And in this interview, he talks about how God has used Vision 2025 in ways that we could never have imagined back when the inception of this vision came about.

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Jim

Yeah. I began the interview by asking Bryan about the Bible translation world of the 1990s, Leading up to the conference in 1999 when Vision 2025 became a real thing. And so, here are his thoughts on that. And then that'll lead into the conversation that followed. And I hope you find it fascinating.

00;02;05;11 - 00;02;34;17

Bryan Harmelink

There were already people talking about these kinds of things before the vision was cast.

The work was going as people were able and people recognized as we still recognize the obstacles, the challenges, all of those things. And this is why the other sense of urgency, not the “do quickly”, but “be focused” on a sense of that, I think resonated with me. You know, in a sense, it's what caught the attention of people in ETEN [Every Tribe Every Nation] early on.

And for them, in a sense, acceleration was often seen as, No, this is not about just working more quickly. It's about if there ways to remove obstacles or a way to allow the person who can only afford to work two days a week, ... if things can be done to provide support so that that translator or the translators and the team can work four or five days a week, then there will be a lot more progress.

It's not like no one was urgent about it, but you know, there were things already happening in these organizations that were kind of already being talked about. But the Vision 2025 statement would have given a much more focused attention to some of these things. It's not the no one recognized the need for partnership or the need for working together.

It's possible to understand the partnership statement in a couple of different ways. One is like the recognition that we sometimes have in our own work of, Wow, I could do this, but it would go a lot more quickly, or it would go better, if someone would come and help me. And so that type of partnership is what some people were thinking.

If we could share this load with others, things would happen more quickly. We could do it all ourselves. But if others would come along and help, things would go better. My preference in thinking about partnership is another angle on this, which is, we can't do this all ourselves. We need, as we talk about it in today's terms, the global Bible translation movement benefits from the participation of diverse partners who do things in different ways. And to me, that's a significant difference in thinking about partnership. Because it's recognizing your contribution as well as your limitations. And at the same time, you're recognizing the strengths and contributions of others involved in the movement that can actually do things better than you can, in ways that you're not able to as a team or an organisation. So it's not just about the number of people involved, but the diversity of the people involved, I think is also very beneficial to the movement.

00;05;28;12 - 00;05;48;17

Jim

Yeah, I was just thinking about the maturing of the global church in these past 20-some years also, and how that picture looks so different, where maybe there were places where there really wasn't an option but to do it ourselves. Meaning “ouyr”, the West. That looks a whole lot different today in so many places.

00;05;48;17 - 00;06;22;24

Bryan

Yeah, and I think that's one of the things that, you know, maybe there were, scholars like Philip Jenkins who, because of their research, were already seeing things that hadn't yet gotten on our, or the leadership of SIL or Wycliffe or other organisations that hadn't that realisation of the vitality of the global church hadn't yet come front and center in people's awareness.

So it would have been probably more in the ... I think, even I when I was working in Americas Area, like in 2004-06, there was already some literature, already discussions of the changes that were being noticed in the global church. One thing, however, I think, is I think we've been slow to recognize and slow to actually shift strategies in light of what we should know about the global church.

Things were already changing in the global church, and to some extent, I feel like some of the Western organizations were slow to respond in ways that probably could have happened sooner. But because of kind of standard ways of working, it takes a while for things to shift. At the time in 1999, when the vision was presented at international conference, very, very few people in that room had any inkling of what the church would become almost 25 years later. And the level of education around the world has changed in this last 25 years since. So, you know, what was kind of an exceptional case, probably 2 or 3 decades ago, in terms of the educational level of some translation teams or even people in certain organisations, that has drastically changed as well.

Not to mention that all the technology changes. No one could have anticipated what we would be able to do with technology today. And so one of the things when I was thinking about Vision 2025, it ties in with the global church and things probably mainly focused on the vitality of the church around the world today, that the increased direct church participation in Bible translation. So the cases that we hear from time to time of the church in a certain region deciding among themselves that they're going to initiate translation programs for people that speak languages in their congregations or their church's denomination, in a region. And if one of the translation agencies wants to help, they're welcome to help. But the church is going to do this.

I would be very surprised if anyone thinking of creative strategies back in 1999 could have imagined this development. Could we have imagined these denominations? And even within the Alliance, the denominations that are Alliance organisations focused on contributing to the Bible translation movement? This, I think, would have been almost an impossibility to think of 25 years ago. But it's happening and it's increasingly happening.

And so I think this is where perhaps some people are uncomfortable with how they see things changing. But I like to think of the rise of church participation and even the oral Bible translation movement and enthusiasm with that, everything that has happened with sign language since, you know, that wasn't really on anyone's radar screen in 1999. All of these things are creative strategies that have happened, kind of to our surprise. It wasn't like someone had a meeting some day and said, 'I think we need to develop a strategy for oral

Bible translation.' There were different people thinking about this type of thing in different ways, and the movement has gained momentum. And so it's been a kind of organic development that surprises even some of us involved in those things, that it's taken off to the level that it has.

I like to see these things as answers to the prayers of people, even praying for Vision 2025, that God has answered some of those prayers, perhaps in unexpected even unanticipated ways.

00;11;39;29 - 00;12;09;19

Jim

As you were mentioning all that, it just points to God being behind it all when we can't explain it, right? It's just fun to watch how God surprises us.

Bryan

Yeah, I think that's exactly right. And that resonates with how I've thought about Vision 2025 over these years, that we can have our focus and try to stimulate creative thinking, and that's very good. But sometimes the way things develop are different from some of the most creative discussions that we could have had. That's one of the ways we see God moving in all of this.

Think of a person who wrote a thesis on a way to do oral Bible translation. An individual. And then someone else reads it and others hear about it, and conversations get started and organisations then get on board. And it's been very interesting to trace the development since that time.

Jim

We can talk about measurable progress or technology or the church, things like that, but attitudinally among the church, I guess, meaning the global body of believers, what do you think has changed and since 1999 that contributes a lot to where we are and the progress that's been made?

Bryan

Well, I think just the increased awareness of the strength of the global church. So we can thank some of the authors who have done the research and have published to help raise our awareness of the kinds of things happening.

For example, there are definite indications of the established institutional church, for example in Europe, declining, while at the same time there has been a development of very vibrant congregations pastored by people from Africa, Latin America and other places that are in a sense ... the church in that sense is very much alive in Europe, even though it looks very different from the state churches of the past.

And I think the same is true in North America, where there are very vibrant, different congregations of diaspora communities, of people who have settled here and thinking specifically of the US, where some are concerned about the decline of mainline denominations very similar to Europe. So there's a greater awareness, I think, of what God is doing in the church, although I think there's still a large segment of, I would say, the American church that is not really aware and doesn't think about this frequently.

I don't want to sound negative, but sometimes I think more in terms of the ways that we are maybe still behind in recognizing some of the things that I think would contribute in a better way to what is happening in the movement. For example, in capacity building, which is one of the other strategic themes. Sometimes capacity building can be, I think, still, as 'the same goes with mission in general, that capacity building can be perceived more as the West to the rest', that we have the capacity to build into others that I think really needs to begin with recognizing the capacity that's already there. And it may not be measured in the same way as the capacity that has been measured for recent decades. But I think that's where we really need to begin, with the recognition of the ability and capacity that people have in the churches and communities and their ability to be a very integral part of the Bible translation process.

Everyone needs help to do translation well. So I'm not saying, oh, we haven't recognized that people already have all the capacity they need in every way. But sometimes I don't think we've recognized enough that our starting point really should be an honest assessment of the capacity that's already there in the community, in the church, and then work together in a collaborative way with people from that starting point.

We still have more to learn about sustainability ... Even though we say we're not, some of our practices kind of indicate that we're really focused on the end product as the process. And we might say, No, we're not about just publishing another Bible or recording another audio if it's an oral or another video if it's sign language.

But at the end of the day, some of our practices, I think, indicate that we tend to be a little more focused on that end product than we should be, because otherwise I think we would have a focus on sustainability that would make us realize if certain elements are not present in certain communities, the process is unsustainable.

Jim

When you say sustainability, can you define that for me in context of Bible translation?

Bryan

Well, one thing ... Here I would connect this to one of the statements from the Alliance board back in 2017, where the Alliance affirmed our desire that the whole Bible be translated everywhere as much as it's feasible, and that we work toward sustainable, community-based processes. One example to explain, you know more what I mean by sustainability there. If the perception is created, and if the practice basically indicates that

all the technical skill for the translation process needs to come from outside of the community and be brought to the community, and if the community is only expected to be where these processes are implemented, that's not sustainable in the sense of what happens. Even if a New Testament or even a whole Bible is published, does the community has any sense of, if we want a revision or if we want a new edition, if we want to just republish, do we have capacity that is recognized within our community or our language groups, or however that's defined?

And that doesn't necessarily mean that every language community should have a publisher and revision committee already in place. But do they even know how to go about networking with others to provide these kinds of ongoing services and capacities for their community? Or has it all come from the outside, been done for them with nothing sustainable left behind to allow these processes to continue?

God has used Vision 2025 to stimulate increased partnership and capacity in the Bible translation movement, to stimulate creative thinking and thinking about sustainability in a way that probably would not have happened without the vision being cast in 1999. Some have gravitated more toward the date as a significant part of the vision. But I tend to think in terms of these strategic themes as, in a sense, the core of the vision, that help us to think and work in in different ways.

Jim

You know, I was thinking of my own career as a writer and how I am a much more effective and focused writer if I'm on a deadline. And whether the year 2025 was ever intended to be a deadline or not, some have treated it that way, and some have at least given that some thought. And I wonder if that's been a motivator, even when it wasn't the intention.

Bryan

Yeah, I think that's true. If you say it's not about the date, there's still something there that is kind of like a marker that is placed. So I think for the organisations that have focused on Vision 2025—because obviously among our partners, not every organization has taken on Vision 2025, but they know about it—I think it has increased our awareness of thinking in ways that would not have happened if the vision hadn't been cast.

Jim

What would you say to organizations who have really not been that familiar or observant with Vision 2025? But there's going to be a lot said about it in the next months. Is it something to kind of discard, or is it something that they could pick up something from?

Bryan

Yeah, I can think of colleagues in other organisations that are not, in a sense, connected to the organisations that have adopted, to some extent, Vision 2025. And I think there is benefit in terms of understanding the value of having a concrete vision that you're working toward, even if you don't focus on that date as the date by which everything of the vision

had to happen. But the way a vision statement like this can stimulate the sense of urgency and the creative thinking and bring a focus to work that may not happen otherwise.

Some people have asked the question, what happens at the end of the year 2025? If all of this was not accomplished by however it might be measured? And I think we just need to say thank God for what *has* happened and has probably happened in ways that it might not have happened had it not been for the kind of focused vision of Vision 2025.

Jim

And if we do reach a point where every living language is underway, that doesn't need to be akin to the dog finally catching the car it's been chasing. There's so much more to do. And I think there's been a danger in selling this concept as that's the end, when all languages are started. And certainly, we know that's not the case.

Bryan

Yeah. And even if you think of the ETEN All Access goals and their date of 2033—and again, that's a vision that has been cast, and even those who discuss these All Access goals recognize that, well, it doesn't actually mean everyone will have access to everything. That's not what is meant by All Access goals. But that for the first time in history, every person speaking one of the world's languages should have access to something.

So it's all the world having access to parts of Scripture, and there's a recognition there that it's not complete, that it's not absolutely everything for everyone in exactly the same way. But it will be a huge milestone. So I think, again, that vision statement is one that is giving greater focus, stimulating creative thinking and perhaps even stimulating collaboration among organisations that might not have been collaborating with each other otherwise.

Jim

You know, it would be possible to underplay this, too. To downplay any sort of a calendar goal with this. But we can just realize what a positive thing this is all been for the Kingdom.

Bryan

Yeah, I think that's a good way of kind of, saying how I feel about this. I get frustrated at times with people who make it sound as if it's the year 2025 or it's the year 2033, and my focus is being thankful for how this stimulates our thinking and creativity, and that God has used Vision 2025 in a positive way.

Phil

So there you have it. And, our deepest thanks go to Bryan Harmelink for that thoughtful and encouraging conversation. Our hope is that it helps all of us understand what Vision 2025 is and also what it is not. And then it also helps us better appreciate the astounding ways that God continues to work through Bible translation movements worldwide.

Jim

Yeah, we really do live an amazing, historic times. And it's quite an honor to be part of this movement. So, I hope you enjoyed this. Until next time, thanks for listening.

Phil  
Goodbye.