

## CAN BIBLE TRANSLATION MOVEMENTS GET THE JOB DONE FASTER?

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*This article by a long-time mentee of mine deals with a fascinating and little-discussed factor in Church Planting Movement (CPMs), the role of local adaptations of the Bible. As a CP mentor-trainer, you may have to advise those whom you mentor on this topic.—George Patterson*

The term *Bible Translation Movement* (BTM) was first described to me by a colleague in a nearby country, where the largest turning of Muslims to Christ in history is happening. What can we learn from what the Lord is doing there? BTMs and CPMs both see rapid multiplication of God's Word in various languages. Thus, *rapid* refers not only to numbers of new translations and churches but to *rapid* obedience to the King. A BTM happens when new churches start to multiply in an unreached people group and new believers and leaders start to translate God's Word into their own language. Such new believers will also, normally, prove motivated to help translate God's Word into neighboring languages, which are culturally similar to their own. BTMs are not currently a missiological fad or dream, but they are happening, often in the second generation of new churches.

While Bible translators should normally have proper theological training, the mentoring relationship that I have with my apprentices remains their only theological education, yet they are leading more of their Buddhist friends and family members to Christ than the salaried, professional church planters working in the same area. These Buddhist-background believers' BTM started spontaneously as churches were multiplying among receptive people who saw the need for a relevant translation in their own tongue.

Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Viggo Olson of the Association of Baptist for World Evangelization and his colleagues undertook to retranslate the entire Bible into a Muslim majority dialect. This proved a groundbreaking work of contextualization that helped stimulate an unprecedented CPM in that country. The standard Bible translation had been made in the minority Hindu dialect a century earlier. Today, at least a quarter of a million Muslim-background believers have been baptized across several CPMs where Dr. Olsen's translation is used. This movement has spilled over the border to every adjacent country. Praise be to the Most High God! Jesus is fulfilling His Mission, sometimes allowing us foreigners to be a part of it.

Most animistic, tribal and illiterate people groups now have Christian churches. The days of a missionary couple venturing into an isolated area to start churches, and spending twenty-five years to translate God's Word into the local language might be at an end. Most of the remaining, unreached people groups live within reach of national or trade language learning centers.

Something similar to that BTM is happening in Buddhist background CPM that I work with. The new church leaders in this unreached people group did not regard the traditional-language Bible translation as relevant to the Buddhist masses that avoid the minority, predominately tribal churches that are scattered in every corner of our country. Not long after I arrived in the area, a handful of believers from a Buddhist minority people group came to find me. We began to translate gospel tracts and multimedia materials into their language. However, there was no Bible translation with which to disciple new believers among them. So, we told Bible stories and had leaders learn those stories in their local language, but they said this was not enough.

Some "orality" experts writing today have little or no experience with Church Planting Movements. Most of their experience and materials have been written in the contexts of animistic, tribal peoples. They have their own views on Bible "storying" and avoid producing practical, hands-on tools that relate to making disciples of leaders. Some orality specialists teach about the "scarlet tread," the sacrificial atonement theme in the Bible. My Buddhist friends would say, "You serve a blood thirsty God who demands so much blood!"

The new believers I work with wanted the Word of God written in a language that speaks to the very soul of their Buddhist communities. The main apostle of this movement laughed out loud as he and I read the words of Martin Luther, “I do not want a Bible in German. My people need a German Bible.” When I asked him why he laughed, he pointed to a contemporary language version lying on his table. “That is not a Bible in our national majority language, for it is not of our culture. It was not translated by our people but by a foreigner.” I thank God for the traditional scripture translations that He has used to bring many into the Kingdom, and that have helped westernized, tribal churches to communicate and theologize between themselves. The existing translations will never lose their predominance in the established church. However, if churches are to reach both majority and minority Buddhist peoples, they must use other versions and adaptations, as well.

I thought that we had planned for a successful CPM by translating the eminent *Train and Multiply* leadership training course and *Activity Guide* written by George Patterson. However, the Buddhist background leaders turn up their noses at the existing Bible translation that these excellent materials were based on. Many of the exercises in those materials that we translated read, for example, “Find in Acts 10, whom Peter brought with him to start the first Roman church.” Well, they could not “find” anything, because they did not have Bibles, and my apprentices would not distribute the Bible in the majority language.

Currently, these new church leaders from a minority people group have formed their own translation committee and are translating from the United Bible Society’s *Contemporary English Version* into the majority language. They have completed the synoptic gospels and Acts as of first importance for them. New believers and seekers prefer Matthew’s Gospel, after asking for evaluations from their Buddhist family and highly-educated monk friends. In contrast, most international Bible consultant organizations have agreements with the national Bible Society that they will not work on newer translation of the existing Bible.

The minority translators follow Jesus’ example in adapting key terms. For example, Jesus redefined the traditional Jewish terms *kingdom* (basileia) and *God* (Theos). Jesus also added meaning to traditional terms. For example, He called *Theos* “Abba” (Father). Calling the Old Testament God “Father” imported a scandalous new meaning into the Jewish community, which it still has in Muslim cultures. He redefined old key terms by pouring new meaning into words like “Kingdom” through his parables and similes (“The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”).

Many Bible translation consultant groups will not work closely with church planters, for they have written agreements with national traditional churches that they will only work on languages where those churches focus, and will not tamper with traditional key terms and phrases. Over the past five years of watching a minority-people CPM, I meditate daily George Patterson’s words, “Just trust the Holy Spirit in the hearts of obedient believers... Trust the Holy Spirit!” “Help seekers and new believers to obey all of Jesus commands in love.”

#### Resources

*Reproducible Pastoral Training*, to multiply churches, O’Connor.

<http://missionbooks.org/wcl/customer/product.php?productid=533&cat=1&page=1>

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