

The Challenge of Bible Translation in Africa Today

By Dr. Ernst R. Wendland

[WLQ: Volume 80, No. 4]

The Growth of Christianity on the Continent

Over 20,000 people per day—a good 150,000 people per week—are currently becoming Christians in Africa, a continent whose Christian growth rate far surpasses that of any other place in the world. According to the figures prepared by Dr. David Barrett, a noted research specialist in the field of Christian growth and development in Africa, there were approximately nine million followers at the turn of the century (or 8% of the estimated total population). By 1980 the figure had jumped dramatically to 203 million, and if growth patterns remain the same (and there is nothing to suggest that they won't), one would expect to find almost 400 million Christians on the continent by the year 2000—that would be nearly *half* of the projected total population! Varied reasons are cited for this phenomenal increase; these need not concern us now, but one all-important factor ought to be acknowledged: it is clear that the Spirit of God is working mightily among the peoples of Africa to build his church in virtually every land, even among the highly-resistant Muslim population.

Africa and God's Word

African people take the Word of God very seriously. Despite the fact that oral forms of communication are still predominant in most societies, the written word is valued for its permanence, exactness and authority. In the majority of traditional religious systems, God is presented as being quite remote and out of touch with the human beings whom he created (the reason is usually attributed to some fault on the part of man). So people must communicate with God indirectly, through and to intermediaries (e.g., diviners and ancestral spirits), both to express and to receive answers to their spiritual needs and problems. Now Christianity has changed all that. Here is a God who communicates directly, in the most dynamic and tangible way possible—first of all in the person of his only Son, the eternal Word, and secondly through his chosen spokesmen, in particular, those who have transmitted his message of love and forgiveness through Christ via the written word, the sacred Scriptures. God's message is important to Africans since it clearly spells out what is to be man's relationship to the physical and spiritual world in which he is situated: man to God, man to his fellowmen, and man to the natural environment around him. This is *good* news for it removes all doubt and uncertainty with regard to this present life and the life to come. Therefore, the people greatly honor God's book—they eagerly want to read and hear it in their own language. If a message is to be regarded as genuine and relevant to a person, then it must be conveyed in his mother-tongue, not a foreign language. An intelligible Bible in the vernacular is and always has been one of the most important factors influencing church growth in Africa. And, we might add, people demand the *full* Bible, not only the New Testament. The Old Testament speaks to them in a special way due to the many social and cultural similarities between ancient Jewish and the traditional African way of life.

Translation Progress in Africa

How many languages are there in Africa? This is one of the most linguistically complex regions of the world and many of the threads still remain to be unraveled, but recent investigations put the figure at somewhere between 1,600 and 2,000 *distinct* languages (each different from the other at least as much as Spanish from Portuguese or French from Italian). Several of the languages have a rather large number of speakers by world standards, for example, Hausa in West Africa and Swahili in East Africa, each with over thirty million speakers. But the typical group averages out to be considerably less, somewhere in the range of

twenty to thirty thousand speakers. The effect of such language diversity upon the translation of Scripture is almost intimidating.

To date, less than one-third (c. 500) of Africa's languages have at least one book of the Bible and only 6% have the entire Bible. The problem with statistics such as these, however, is that they indicate quantity alone, but the *quality* of translation also needs to be considered to get an accurate picture of what remains to be done. And here we must admit that the vast majority (over 75%) of the Bibles and portions now available are generally unsatisfactory. They are not easy to understand, but rather confront the reader with many serious barriers to his comprehension. A number of these translations are over half a century old and transmit an archaic form of the language which is not familiar to contemporary speakers. Most of them are also literal renderings which reflect the grammatical structures of Hebrew and Greek (or English and French) rather than the natural flow of the African language into which the translation was done. And finally, many of these original versions were done by those who were not mother-tongue speakers, missionaries in particular, with the result that the message often gets obscured, or even obliterated, by unnatural and incorrect usages: "We think we know what it means, but we would never say it that way!" The amazing thing to see is the great respect and reverence which Africans everywhere have for such difficult and sometimes meaningless versions. Their devotion to Scripture is so firm that occasionally a group will actually resist the undertaking of a new Bible translation project in its midst. Such people do not want anyone to "tamper" with the Word of God, even if they cannot understand it!

UBS and WBT

Two multi-national, world-wide Christian bodies: the United Bible Societies and Wycliffe Bible Translators, are the principal agents working to meet the vast needs of Scripture translation in Africa today. Both organizations are non-denominational groups, although both expect members to adhere to the fundamental tenets of Christianity. Their sole objective is to provide the Word of God to people who do not have an adequate translation in their language. Their purpose is not to evangelize—in the sense of winning converts to a particular denomination—but to provide the basis for evangelism, the Bible, for all churches who wish to use it. This task consists of three interrelated phases: the translation, production, and distribution of the Scriptures. WBT concerns itself only with the first. The central goal of these two organizations is the same, but they differ in their focus of attention. The Wycliffe Bible Translators generally work in pioneer situations: the people usually have nothing of the Bible, and in many cases their language has not even been reduced to writing. The United Bible Societies work only through a local Bible society in situations where national churches have already been established and when these groups have formally requested that an initial or a new translation of the Bible be provided. The WBT and UBS closely coordinate their translation programs in the Africa region so that there is little or no duplication of effort. The remarks that follow pertain to the UBS in particular since it is currently the only body organizing translation operations in Central Africa (Malawi and Zambia).

Translation Objectives

The United Bible Societies state this as their overall objective: every person in Africa should have access to the Scriptures in a high quality "common language" (as opposed to a literary or liturgical) translation in a language that is understood and at a price that is affordable. In order to carry out this objective, the UBS through its nationally constituted member societies seeks to gain the fullest possible participation of receptor language communities in a unified approach to supplying qualified translation personnel and sufficient funds to support the various translation projects in a given country. As a basic minimum (i.e. whether project funding is possible or not), the UBS endeavors to provide trained consultants to organize and oversee local translation programs so as to produce work that is of the highest quality possible under existing conditions. The goal is translations which are both *faithful* to the original message of Scripture and also *idiomatic* statements of that message in the language of the people. In order to establish and supervise effective translation projects, consultants must carry out the following responsibilities: choose, train, and develop the translation team plus a

force of capable reviewers; monitor the progress of work and control the quality of the translation with regard to accuracy of content as well as naturalness of idiom; and lastly, oversee the preparation of the final texts and proofreading of the printer's manuscripts. On the basis of present translation work in the Africa region, it is estimated that the projects to which the Bible Societies are already committed will, with God's blessing, produce 60–90 complete Bibles and 130–200 New Testaments during the decade of the 80's. This figure will include full Bibles published in most of the languages which are being used in the evangelistic outreach of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa (LCCA): Bemba, Chewa, Tumbuka, Lozi and Tonga.

Obstacles to Quality Translation

As was mentioned earlier, one cannot gauge success according to statistics alone. In recent years a real concern has arisen in UBS circles with regard to the quality of the translations which are being prepared and printed, not only in Africa, but all over the world. This concern issues from the realization that more and more projects are not receiving the linguistic and exegetical attention that is required to produce translations having a degree of excellence which befits the Word of God. There are two principal factors that are operating to decrease the quality of Scripture translation in Africa today: limited funds and a shortage of staff.

In 1981 the UBS, like the WELS, is experiencing a severe financial crisis. This affects all phases of the work: project support, personnel, office and travel expenses, pre- and post-translation research and testing programs, and so forth. In Africa this means that the translations department, for example, is presently committed to doing two and one half times the work with 7% less purchasing power than it had in 1972. Any budget over-expenditures (11% in 1980, largely due to inflation) will in future be subtracted from the budget for the following year. No emergencies allowed! It has reached the point where the UBS can no longer provide any form of subsidy to new translation projects, no matter how important the language may be. All expenses must be met by funds generated by local churches and the national Bible Society concerned. This budget crunch reduces the salaries paid to translators, limits the period of time a team is allowed to complete its work, restricts meeting time and the opportunity to win a wider involvement of the Christian constituency, and all but eliminates the provision of commentaries and other technical aids. The quality of work produced, therefore, suffers greatly.

The translation staffs in Africa are facing barriers that are even more formidable. Only a dozen consultants are available on a fulltime basis to serve the more than 400 projects that are currently underway. On the average, each consultant is responsible for guiding the progress of over two dozen separate projects, as opposed to an optimum of seven. Instead of enjoying even the minimum amount of "contact time" to spend with a given translation team (i.e., two weeks per year), the typical consultant considers himself fortunate if he has a whole three days! Twenty-five additional translations consultants are needed now just to take care of the programs already begun, but considering the present adverse economic situation, it will be surprising if half that many are engaged during the decade of the 80s. Under these conditions, it is virtually impossible for satisfactory, let alone "quality" translation work to be done.

The Lutheran Contribution

Endeavoring to carry out its objectives in the face of such serious obstacles, UBS translation officers in Africa have tried in different ways to alleviate the situation. One successful approach has been to promote the indigenization of funding local translation projects. Thus, in the past eight years, UBS financial aid of this type has shrunk from 41 to 14% of the total budget, and well over 80% of these projects are now fully self-supporting. Another method, this time in the area of staff development, has been to seek qualified personnel from the ranks of missionaries residing in Africa to serve as "honorary" translations consultants. Except for administrative duties, individuals function in the same capacity as full-time UBS staff, in the particular area in which they are working. However, each continues to be supported by his own mission organization as its contribution to the general cause of Scripture translation on the continent and also to the group's specific

evangelistic program among the people for whom the translations are being prepared. There are four honorary consultants, all Lutheran, presently assisting in various degrees (from part to full-time) the UBS translation function in Africa: in Nigeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, and Zambia.

The Lutheran Church of Central Africa, under the auspices of the Committee on Education, is contributing to the translation of two principal languages in the region: Chewa (OT) and Tonga (NT). Speakers of these two languages constitute by far the largest proportion of members in the LCCA, over 75%. An older, "missionary" translation exists in both Chewa and Tonga, but these are becoming increasingly less effective in speaking to the needs of today's African Christians. New common-language versions are definitely necessary, and translation projects are well underway in both languages. This is not a matter of our volunteering our services merely to be a part of the program. In each case we have been formally requested to take the lead both in supervising and in actually conducting the translation work because, to put it simply, there is just no one else available. The work that had been completed prior to our involvement was in one case poor and in the other totally unacceptable. Pastor Salimo Hachibamba, one of the first graduates of our Lutheran Seminary and currently an instructor there, has since last year been serving part-time as coordinator and chief reviewer of the Chitonga Bible Translation program. He has completely reorganized the project and set it on a progressive new course which aims at 1983 as the completion date of the New Testament. Mr. Daison Mabedi, while a student at the Lutheran Seminary, made a significant contribution to the review of the Chewa Old Testament. During his present two-year vicarage, however, it has not been possible for him to continue his Bible translation work, but hopefully he will be able to resume his valuable assistance in 1982 at the time of his graduation and ordination. The Chewa Bible, including a revision of the New Testament which was published in 1977, is scheduled for completion sometime in 1985.

Other excellent opportunities for extending our Christian witness through the means of Bible translation are ever before us, being limited only by the time that is available to devote to this cause. The Sena and Yao projects in Malawi, for instance, are slowly and not very surely limping along due to the lack of qualified personnel and the inability to offer them any sustained exegetical and translational guidance. The importance of these languages (Luvale in Zambia is a similar case for the future) lies not so much in their number of speakers, but it is due to the fact that in each case, more than half of the speakers reside in neighboring Mozambique, a country with a Marxist government which has expelled missionaries and banned all forms of direct Christian evangelism. In such a situation, the Word alone, in the form of a meaningful Bible translation, is one of the few ways in which God's message of salvation can reach the lives of people who are enslaved both physically and spiritually.

Bible Translation as Evangelism: the Inner Focus

Bible translation is not an option to be followed only if and when we have the financial means and manpower. Rather, it is a unique opportunity which God in his grace has placed before us to insure that the truths of his Word are communicated faithfully in the languages of Central Africa.

This effort is first and foremost serving the interests of the LCCA and its own program of winning souls for Christ. After all, the Bible, more specifically, each vernacular Bible which the UBS is translating, publishing and distributing, is the foundation of every teaching and practice of our church. The choice we have is simple: do we want to correct the text before or after it is finalized in printed form? Choosing the latter course in the interest of expediency ("we don't have the men—we don't have the money—other LCCA programs are more important at the moment") would be, in my opinion, a gross neglect of duty and a good example of "burying the talent" which the Lord has given us to put to use in his service. We are, comparatively speaking, a rather small church in Central Africa, but our strength and future potential lies in the thorough Biblical instruction which we give to our people, our church leaders in particular. Why not capitalize on this resource and utilize those qualified individuals among us, whether national or expatriate, to see that the translations which are currently being produced in our midst are as clear a reflection of Holy Scripture as possible?

We would soon live to regret any decision to sit back and depend upon the work of others in this task. One is horrified just thinking about the possibility that even a small proportion of the errors which we have already corrected in Chewa and Tonga drafts (virtually all unintentional, resulting simply from a lack of understanding of the original) would be fixed in print for years to come. In addition to presenting grave problems in all aspects of Christian instruction, such mistakes—whether large or small, exegetical, translational, or mechanical—could have a serious effect on our people’s reverence for the Word. “How can God’s book be inspired and inerrant if it contains all these errors?” they could rightly ask, and we would be hard-pressed to simply attribute all the faults to the incompetency of the translators. In fact, we could not, in good conscience, even make the latter accusation were we to miss our chance to take part in the formation of the text. We now have an unlimited opportunity to improve these translations *before* they ever see the light of day.

The Outer Focus

Bible translation work is LCCA work, whether it happens to be sponsored by the UBS or some other organizing body. The translation of God’s Word vitally affects all aspects of our ministry here in Zambia and Malawi, and therefore we have an obligation to do what we can to insure that the job gets done right. But more than that, this effort through God’s blessing is bound to have a positive influence upon the church at large in Central Africa, including those Christians who are living in countries next door where freedom of worship has been drastically curtailed. All of these groups and individuals must use the same Bibles as we do, for there is only one generally approved source of supply in the region, namely, the United Bible Societies. Of course, we are not justified in translating a “Lutheran Bible”, that is one which would reflect a *purely* Lutheran hermeneutical perspective in controversial passages, for such a biased version, no matter how correct we regard it to be doctrinally, would soon be seen for what it is and rejected by the majority. However, we are justified in preparing an exegetically faithful translation, one which clearly and consistently conveys the sense of Scripture in the language of today. Where genuine ambiguities exist in the original, that is, where several equally valid interpretations are possible, whether we happen to agree theologically with all of the alternatives or not, we will attempt to preserve this potentially diverse meaning in the translation. Above all, we try to make sure that no rendering of a passage where there is a difference of opinion excludes the confessional Lutheran position on the matter.

In this way, the LCCA is seeking to set forth the truths of God’s Word so that they may be correctly and readily understood by *all* who read and hear the translations which we are helping to prepare. This, in itself, is an important means of doing evangelism. To be sure, we are not overtly witnessing in the name of Lutheranism, and so we as a church body cannot expect to greatly expand our physical membership as a result of this work. However, we will be firmly testifying to our faith, albeit anonymously, through the pages of the Scriptures that we translate and revise. Who is to say that this is not as equally valid a method of winning souls for God’s universal kingdom as the undisguised denominational approach? Both methods have their place and their purpose in his gracious plan. The point to bear in mind is that our frail and fallible efforts—and these become increasingly apparent the more we work with the Scriptures—are certainly no enabling force which allows the Holy Spirit to carry out his mission of conversion and sanctification. Our goal is simply to remove from his path through the Word as many exegetical and linguistic obstacles as possible, to permit God to speak his saving message with a minimum of distortion to those whom he has chosen in Central Africa.

Conclusion

I can’t help thinking that were Martin Luther living in Africa today, he would be thoroughly enthusiastic about the challenge posed by the present translation task. Problems there are, to be sure, and I have only been able to touch upon some of the more important of these. But there are also tremendous possibilities for Christian witness, a relatively unhindered opportunity to make God’s Word live for speakers of hundreds of different languages. Luther’s ultimate concern that the Scriptures be communicated faithfully, yet also in language which

the common man can not only understand but also enjoy, is shared by translators working in tribal groups scattered over the whole face of Africa:

Very simply, the task of the translator is not that of reproducing in one language words exactly equivalent to the words of another language, but of reproducing in vigorous vernacular idiom the meaning originally expressed in the foreign tongue.... We must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children in the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translations accordingly.

With this as our goal, we of the Lutheran Church of Central Africa confidently take up the challenge, humbly asking the Lord to bless our human endeavor to communicate his holy Word to a sinful world. Indeed, we are thankful for being given this special opportunity to be used as instruments in carrying out his wonderful plan:

... There before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.... They cried out in a loud voice:
 "Salvation belongs to our God,
 Who sits on the throne.
 and to the Lamb" (Re 7:9, 10).

The Holy Spirit, working through the translation, preaching and teaching of God's Word, has transformed a continent once called "Dark" into a shining example of Christian growth and witness in the world today.