

# 32 The Bible Translation Strategy for Evangelism: From Vision to Call, One Mennonite's Experience

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Out at the far-flung corners of the world, there are some dusty boxes sitting in storage sheds. The sad part: they're full of Bibles.<sup>1</sup> The reasons that these boxes remain unopened are many and varied, but the reality is just as painful in each case. As a result, the question of how new translations will actually be *used* has become the first consideration for the viability of most Bible translation projects. Where once the primary focus for many was that "Every man, woman, and child would be able to read God's Word in their own language,"<sup>2</sup> it has now become "Scripture in Use."<sup>3</sup>

Today, in order to launch a new Bible translation project under one of the better-known agencies, certain conditions must be met that encourage the use of the finished product. For example: it is preferable that competent people be in place to teach the new Scripture, that there be a sizable group eager to apply what they learn from their teachers,<sup>4</sup> an excellent relationship between these two groups, a solid literacy program, and signs of the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the project.<sup>5</sup>

For this reason, few translations are done anymore without an established church asking for them. When the right conditions have been discerned, committees are formed, prayer support organized, budgets made, funding found, qualified people trained, professional supervision established, resources allocated, quality control measures put in place, schedules written, the project launched, and things start to happen. Today, virtually from day one, Scripture that is translated goes into operation, teaching people as part of the translation *testing* process, one of the standard quality control measures. Also, first edition printings of translated Scripture now tend to be much more modest in size. People are using their storage sheds for others things.

## The Vision

But what about using the word of God as an evangelism tool in unreached people groups? Might it be the case that the Bible itself can unlock doors that have been closed to evangelistic sharing? Could there be places where the word itself has more credibility than mere ideas heard during brief evangelism events put on by outsiders (usually in trade languages—not in the mother tongue)? For conservative, stable communities, wouldn't the authorized version of God's story of the saving of this world through Jesus Christ need to be clear before the authentic leaders there would choose to meet Jesus themselves? When Scripture selections (not the whole Bible) are translated to meet these needs, this approach is called "The Translation Strategy."<sup>6</sup>

It's not particularly popular. A lot of hard work has to be done just to get it off the ground, with no guarantee of success. The missionaries must establish a home in the new community. The language and culture must be learned. Good relationships built. In order to deliver God's Word and not just someone's personalized version of it, good translation procedures must be followed. This puts a heavy load on all involved from those who send to those who go since there are likely few local people to initially share in the work. It's very hard to attack all of these challenges at once—yet they just don't come any other way. This strategy may run no risk of producing unopened boxes of Bibles, but it can still come to a dead end.

Those who do this work need to have a rare combination of gifts and training. They must be well trained linguists, good language learners, computer "geeks," anthropologists, missiologists, educators, storytellers, socially astute, ministers of grace, survivors, and usually, really good with tools—since they often have to fix all of their own stuff. Many of the unreached peoples of this world live in some hard-to-reach places. The missionaries must also be team players since no one person can do the job alone. And, since we are truth-telling here, these mission workers need to be good at forgiving themselves for their inadequacies. The fact is, there really aren't many people to be found (or even teams of people) with this entire special skill set. Certainly there are fewer than those of us who are actually trying to do the work!

Consequently, those who send these people must be faithful to support the work in any way that is necessary—and not just for five years, but until it is finished. This can take a lot longer than one would imagine since, by definition, it is something that has never been done before, in a new place, and therefore will entail many unforeseen challenges. And what does "finished" mean? Since the mission is translation for evangelism, "finished" doesn't just mean translating selected parts needed for sharing the gospel—it means actually sharing the entire gospel and making disciples!

As daunting as the Translation Strategy is, it is actually being used by some mission agencies. New Tribes Mission is one group that specializes in this work.

What usually keeps these people at their task? A determination to do for others what they appreciate others having done for them—the opening of the Bible to their understanding. When we first share who Jesus is, and then how and why to obey all that Jesus commanded—by listening to God’s words and not just ours—some doors that were closed do open. You will see that, at least in our case, though you don’t have to be a Mennonite to do this work, it was an enormous advantage in one important area: explaining who we really are, and why we would do this work.

### **The Application**

Sirigi sat in his cane chair, in the small patch of afternoon shade cast by his mud brick house. He smiled. Opening his hands to “the sky”<sup>7</sup> in an attitude of prayer that he learned from “believers,” he said, “Thank you God.” It was a thank you for a gift that had been over twenty-five years in the making. He had watched and waited for the day when this gift would be ready for him to enjoy. His first plan of action: share his new gift with one of his old friends. That’s what good people do with the very best of things that come to them—share them with those they love.

Sirigi has always tried to be this kind of good person—focused on sharing good things with others. Close to forty years ago, he was one of the young men who came back to Burkina Faso from his migrant work in Ivory Coast with something to help his village. Something that was more than just money. Being one of the chief’s sons, and having been initiated into the secrets and covenants of his people at an early age, he had always been dedicated to fulfilling the call on his life to be a real Nanerigé<sup>8</sup> man. It was this focus that was pushing him now to attempt something difficult. He would ask for change to come to his town, and as he well knew, change doesn’t come easily for his people.

It would take real work to accomplish what he and some other young men had in mind. Deeply conservative, committed to unity at all levels of their society, his people were convinced that they were already on the right track with “the powers,” and needed no new religious ideas and practices. But Sirigi was convinced there was something that the village needed in order to be even stronger—a mosque. Of all the new religious traditions coming into the area promising peace with God and the key to good living, Islam simply felt the most *right*. Simple. Respectful. It took people as they were and helped them to live together as colleagues in faith and service to God. It gave them daily, public, powerful ways to show their respect for God and each other. The young men had seen the good results of Islam during their time away. They wanted these results to be seen in their own village.

Sirigi's work to bring positive change to his village succeeded beyond his wildest expectations. Now, forty years later, he could look back on this thing he had done that had gone so well. With his dedicated help, its coming had not torn the village into factions that struggled against each other. His own brother, when he became chief, remained Sirigi's close companion, even though as chief, he would never compromise his devotion to the ancestors and the village fetish that they had set up for the good of all, and follow Islam. Though Kuluzé, the chief, would never join the mosque, neither would he resist it, nor his brother with his new devotion to Allah. Allah, after all, was Kle (God). Kle was already a part of everything that was going on. Nothing could succeed outside of his will. Men reciting memorized Arabic incantations five times a day while kneeling on a mat and facing east hurt nothing. The ancestors and the fetish powers (things they believed that God had created) seemed to approve. Over time, the vast majority of the men of the village had joined the mosque.

Members of other religious groups asked for and were given permission to hold "evangelism campaigns." They were given a hearing. And then they went on their way. Through this, a few people around town had latched onto the idea that Jesus was somehow important. But these people had trouble explaining how Jesus was better than God alone, and easier to follow than Islam.

And then someone different came. AIMM<sup>9</sup> missionaries Dan and Kathy Petersen asked to speak to Sirigi's brother, the chief. Dan presented Kuluzé with an option: should the village leaders approve, Dan and his family would move to their village, learn the Nanerigé language, and get the main points of the word of God translated into Nanerigé so that people could hear them for themselves. Would Kuluzé arrange a meeting with the village council at which this idea could be presented? It was done. The council heard Dan and his idea. They approved of it. Kuluzé then took on the job of hosting the visitors—helping them find a place to live and someone to help them do the work they were planning to share with others. He put the Petersens on a plot of land near his brother Sirigi. The year was 1985.

Today, Sirigi's prayer of thanks to God is for the story he had just heard in the Bible: the story of the Messiah, the one foretold in the first book of the Bible (Gen. 49:10) whose authority would be recognized by all and last forever; the "Son of Man" who would be called "the Mighty God" and would rule over God's people (Isa. 9:6-7); the Suffering Servant (Isa. 53) whose death would pay the debt for mankind's sin and open the door to the healing of all that is hurting us; Jesus, whose character and purpose were seen in his prayer, "Father forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." Jesus, who came back from the dead to release God's Holy Spirit to inhabit his people and to take his rightful place at the head of the church, guiding it into

eternal life. Sirigi's simple prayer, "Faabe Kle" ("Thank you God"), was a prayer of gratitude for this saving work that had been done by Christ.

The moment of Sirigi's understanding, and the expression of his gratitude, had been long in coming. Dan Petersen was no longer there to hear Sirigi pray it. Neither was he there to see three of Kuluzé's adult children be baptized into the new path that is so clearly stated in the Bible. Dan wasn't there when Kuluzé cut the ribbon across the doorway of the new Mennonite church building, declaring, "What goes on in this house has my complete blessing." Over the years, another Mennonite missionary had replaced Dan and had kept the work going. Like Dan, it had taken me well over a decade to get to the place where I could do what I had just done—sit with Sirigi and listen to the panoramic Bible story in Nanerigé, making useful comments and explaining things along the way.



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This is what Sirigi now thinks: something wonderful is taking place in his village. Not only is there godly religion, but now people are getting to hear the very word of God for themselves in their own language. He is content. But he is also puzzled. In many respects, what he has heard in the Bible doesn't match what he has heard at the mosque. More work needs to be done to get to the bottom of this. There is no way that Sirigi can conceive of God giving his word to the world and then not being strong enough to protect it from being tampered with by bad people.<sup>10</sup> The assertion that God would have failed in this regard and then need to give his sacred word to mankind a second time in a vastly reduced form (the Koran) just doesn't hold up. The original word takes precedence. How did this happen that Islam appeared?

Could it be that someone powerful has once again tried to change God's message (as happened in the Garden of Eden, and as was the case at the time of the Protestant Reformation)? In explaining myself to Sirigi before sharing God's word with him, I had told him the faith story of my own people—a people born out of persecution as they claimed the Jesus of the Bible, the Jesus they could now read about in a translation that they understood (thanks to Martin Luther's translation). Sirigi was prepared to ask the crucial question: "Could it be that today, as in the past, some

authority has emerged that resists ordinary people simply listening to the original word of God?” Is the serpent of Genesis still with us today, coercing people into accepting *his* ideas over God’s? Now, since the Bible message is available, people can begin to make judgments on this issue based on understanding rather than hearsay. The Nanerigé have waited a long time for the message to be delivered. With some key Scripture in hand, it is time to figure out where to go next—life with God, or life with the serpent. This is huge stuff.

Sirigi wasn’t thanking us missionaries for what he had just heard as he listened to the panoramic Bible story over the course of two weeks. He was thanking God. The story in the Bible never once mentions Mennonites. We don’t wonder at that. But, should there ever be Mennonites that can’t tell the Bible story, can’t joyfully explain what it means to obey all that Jesus commanded, or Mennonites that don’t depend on the “Living Water” in order to serve, or Mennonites who aren’t directly engaged in the great task of bringing others to understand what God has done to help us as recorded in Scripture, then we should wonder what the name “Mennonite” has come to mean.

Sirigi listened to the Bible story partly because of who it was that shared it with him. Though we’d been friends and neighbors for years, now that it was appropriate to do so, I could go deeper in sharing who I was. Before listening to Scripture together (by his invitation), I eagerly shared my family’s Mennonite story with him. I showed him illustrations from *The Martyrs Mirror*, including one depicting the horrible aftermath of a mother having been burned alive for simply obeying the Word of God without compromise. The picture is of Maeyken Wens’s<sup>11</sup> young son Hans, holding the cruel tongue screw that had been driven into his mother’s palate to stop her from sharing her faith as she died. I explained to Sirigi that I am a spiritual descendant of such people. That because I have greatly benefited from the blessing that God has given me in his word, I will be a part of sharing those blessings with others until they have them too. God gave us his word so that we could understand it. Sadly, some religions ignore it, or worse, want to silence it by replacing it with a word of their own.

We didn’t come to Sirigi’s people preaching the Mennonite church. We came “preaching” like Mennonites. We ask others, “Would you like to hear what God’s word says?” And when they say, “Yes,” we deliver that message.

I wasn’t raised Mennonite. I chose to become one. Why? Based on their definition of themselves and the testimony of their origins, Mennonites love God’s word, understand it, follow it without compromise, and share it with others so that they too can benefit. The Kingdom of God has begun. Jesus is ruling. Mennonites put no

other authority above his. I agree with the Mennonite perspective: if others would only listen to the Jesus of the Bible, wars would cease, power from God would flow into this world to change it (John 7:37), and people could all be blessed by a loving God who would help them to do his will until “the end of the age.” There will never be a real Mennonite, or a real Christian, that takes good things away from Sirigi’s people by force—like the French had done during their colonial rule, a rule that only ended after World War II, when Sirigi was a little boy. The French army, who supported the building of a Catholic mission station in Sirigi’s village in the 1950s, without asking anyone if they wanted one, left few friends behind among the Nanerigé when they left.

### The Call

We all need the Translation Strategy—whether the Bible is already translated into our language or not. Are you a mature Christian? Are there people that you love that aren’t celebrating the blessings of the new life in Christ that God promises to us all? Go to work. Read them the right parts of the story that they need to hear. If the Bible isn’t available in a language that they understand, or if you don’t know how to use it to help others, change this situation.

The Translation Strategy, putting Scripture to use as God intended (see Isaiah 55:10-11), is bearing fruit once again, this time in Burkina Faso, West Africa. And that is why Sirigi, sitting in his cane chair beside his mud brick house, looked up at the sky and said, “Thank you,” and then he turned to his friends and invited them to listen with him. The translation of the word of God into Nanerige will not end up as unread books in dusty boxes. It is going to work, drawing communities to Christ, as God intended.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Darrell L. Whiteman, “Bible Translation and Social and Cultural Development,” in *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years*, ed. Philip C. Stine (New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 136. Also, from a presentation made by Ed Lauber, SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) director of Burkina Branch in 1996 in the village of Tin, Burkina Faso, West Africa. He shared that one of his first jobs as a new missionary with SIL was to try to get Bibles that had been published for a language in Ivory Coast out of the boxes and into use. He had little success.

<sup>2</sup> “Our History,” *Wycliffe Bible Translators*, accessed May 2, 2014, <https://www.wycliffe.org/about/>

- <sup>3</sup> “Notes on Scripture in Use,” *SIL International*, accessed May 2, 2014, <http://www.sil.org/series/notes-scripture-use>.
- <sup>4</sup> “A rule of thumb has often been to see a possible distribution of at least 500 New Testaments and at least 2,000 Bibles before resources are committed to a New Testament or Bible translation project.” “About UBS Translation Work,” *United Bible Societies*, accessed May 2, 2014, [http://www.ubs-translations.org/about\\_us/](http://www.ubs-translations.org/about_us/). The conditions referred to here assume that there are people who can read the translation and can be trained to do translation work. This situation is typical of a church community in which evangelism, church planting, and literacy work having already been successful.
- <sup>5</sup> Margaret M. Bendor-Samuel, et al., *A Manual For Strategic Planning and Review For Language Programs*, (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1987), vi.
- <sup>6</sup> Wayne T. Dye, *Bible Translation Strategy: An Analysis of its Spiritual Impact* (Dallas: Wycliffe Bible Translators, 1980), 19, 166.
- <sup>7</sup> “Sky” and “God” are the same word in his language: Kle.
- <sup>8</sup> “Nanerige’,” the name of his tribe, means “the real men.” It was given to this people by their neighbors as a result of their reputation for hard work and manly commitment to self-control.
- <sup>9</sup> Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission.
- <sup>10</sup> Such is one common explanation for why Allah needed to send the Koran.
- <sup>11</sup> “Maeyken Wens: One face of Early Anabaptism,” *Young Anabaptist Radicals*, accessed May 2, 2014, <http://young.anabaptistradicals.org/2006/11/11/maeyken-wens-one-face-of-early-anabaptism/>

## Study Questions

1. In your own words, explain how the Translation Strategy for evangelism is different than other strategies.
2. In this case study, the author has much to say about the relationship of the messenger to the message. What is this relationship? What does it mean for the ministry of Bible translation? What does it mean for preaching and teaching?
3. By doing some of your own research, try to find out how many languages in the world still have no Scripture portions.