

# John Bendor-Samuel

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Dr John Bendor-Samuel, known as JBS to many of his friends and colleagues, was a well-known and dearly loved missionary statesman and a well-respected specialist in African linguistics.

John Theodore Bendor-Samuel was born on June 9 1929 in Worthing on the South coast of England, to the Rev. Theodore Bendor-Samuel and Dorothy Ruth. When John was 2 years old, the family moved to Winchester where his father was Pastor at the Perks Memorial Mission, now Winchester Evangelical Church. John would later recall a happy and secure childhood, shared with X siblings, despite the inevitable hardships caused by World War Two. In 1945, John's father took over as pastor of Putson Baptist Church in Hereford and in 1949 he became minister of Landsdowne Evangelical Free Church in West Norwood.

In June 1943, John was baptised and that was the time where he determined that he would serve God in a full time capacity, wherever that would lead him.

The young John was a promising student and did well at school. His father later recalled that John was always a hard worker; as soon as he returned home from school he would open his books and do his homework and once that was finished he would settle down to study his latest hobby or to work for a Campaigners badge. Surprisingly in the light of his later life, John was not particularly adept learning languages. He described his language studies as being "dismal and depressing – equally to me and my teachers. I had endured Latin and German only to the level where I could scrape into Oxford, so that I could get on with my real study".

However, before he could go to Oxford, John had to spend two years in the army as his national service. Feeling a call to mission work, John was keen that his national service should take him overseas and repeatedly requested that he could be transferred. However, John proved too useful as an instructor in his unit and he was promoted to the rank of corporal and kept in England. After a year, John determined that he really should press to go overseas, so he resigned his rank, which forced his commander's hand because he could no longer serve as an instructor. Courtesy of the British Government, John was able to enjoy a 'gap year' in Egypt, Libya and Malta, where he learned first-hand of the need for Muslim peoples to come to understand the Gospel.

After national service, John went up to Christ Church Oxford, where he studied for a degree in history a subject which continued to interest him throughout his life. At the time of his death, he was working through the archives of SIL in Africa, drawing together the story of the development of the organisation through a turbulent period in history.

From Oxford, John went on to London where he studied for a diploma in Education and another diploma in Theology. His choice of post-graduate studies was motivated by his desire to serve the Lord overseas teaching Biblical studies. However, John was fully aware that if he were to be useful in mission service, he would need to learn the language of the country he was working in; his early painful experiences notwithstanding.

*"In common with three million others after the Second World War, I had been privileged to see something of the wider overseas world, courtesy of His Majesty. National Service had given me an*

*opportunity I would not otherwise have had of experiencing other cultures. It did not take much acumen on my part to perceive that learning the local language was an essential element in effective communication.”*

It came as something of a relief to him when “out of the blue” in 1953 he came across an announcement of a summer training course to help missionaries learn non-Indo-European languages. This was the first ever course offered by SIL in the UK and it was to profoundly shape the rest of John’s life in more ways than one.

The first course was held on the premises of London Bible College where the conditions were, to say the least, basic, but this did not discourage the students or staff. One of the lecturers that summer was Kenneth L. Pike, at that time one of the most eminent linguists in the world.

*Pike was quite unlike any teacher I had previously had—a whirlwind of energy and full of illustrations from his own fieldwork but at the same time very approachable and indeed treating neophytes like me as if we were his equals, eager to debate every point of linguistic analysis. I had no idea whatsoever that he was an eminent linguist and blush to think of my ignorant boldness in arguing with him on various occasions. By the end of this stimulating summer, instead of dreading languages, I came away enjoying linguistics, having found to my genuine surprise that I could, after all, cope with languages.*

The summer was a busy one for John. He couldn’t afford the full residential cost of the course, so he stayed at his parents’ home in Norwood and cycled into central London each day. A hard day spent studying a new subject, with a long cycle ride at each end of the day would have been enough for most people, but in the evenings, John would get back to work on his theology diploma which he had not quite completed.

One of the other students on the course that summer was Pamela Moxham who had recently graduated in classics from London University. As the course went on, she felt a call from God to join Wycliffe Bible Translators, the sister organisation of SIL who were running the course. At that time, Wycliffe had no base in the UK and it was not at all clear how this young, single English girl could join a mission based in the United States. Eventually, Pam was encouraged to go on studying linguistics at the School of Oriental and African Studies while some solution could be worked out.

Meanwhile, it was obvious that the summer school had been a success and should be repeated the following year. The committee which had sponsored the original course invited the American team to come back the following year. There was a need for someone to act as a representative for the linguistics courses and to promote Bible translation in the UK and John Bendor-Samuel seemed to be the ideal person. John was more than willing to help and saw no problem fitting these responsibilities alongside his theology studies.

That autumn, his attic bedroom became the first Wycliffe office in the UK. He had paper, envelopes, an old type-writer and a donated filing cabinet. When he finished his theology studies, his books could swiftly be moved to one side and his study-bedroom converted to a mission headquarters.

With help from his brother David, John bought a motorbike and sidecar (David could also be called on to help crank start the bike when needed). Criss-crossing the country, John spoke about Wycliffe and challenged British churches to have a concern for people who don’t have a single word of the

Bible in their languages. He also spent a great deal of time looking for somewhere to hold the next summer's linguistic course. Eventually, after a great deal of searching he came upon an old army camp in Chigwell, Essex which was owned by a Christian couple who were more than happy to see it used for missionary training.

*"The next summer, three of us who had done well were invited back as apprentice teachers. Certainly one of the best ways to learn any subject is to teach it to others! I taught Syntax. Again, I thoroughly enjoyed the summer and decided to join Wycliffe. It made sense, too, in terms of my previous thinking—after all, how could you teach Biblical studies to people when they didn't have a Bible in a language they could understand!"*

John described that decision to join Wycliffe in more detail in Phyllis Thompson's book, Matched with his hour.

*"It was really just the result of that contact in 1953. Meeting people and hearing about the need for Bible translation. I was very naïve. In looking back it is surprising, for I was a very well instructed Christian by ordinary standards. Christian parents, very active in I.V.F. and all the rest of it. But I hadn't any conception of the amount of Bible translation that still needed to be done. I'd never heard of it. I'd always assumed that the Bible Society had it all take care of. So it was quite a new thought. I hadn't felt clear about the Lord's leading, though I knew it was abroad and probably something to do with the Scriptures. Well, I thought, maybe this is why I haven't know up to know what he wants me to do."*

Kenneth Pike saw great promise John and encouraged him to do post graduate study in linguistics at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London. Pike's recommendation and his two summers at SIL were enough to secure John a place at SOAS and after a year's study he completed the necessary preliminaries to register for a PhD.

Over the next year, Pam Moxham would help John with his phonetics studies ("I can't tell a glottal stop from a bus stop", he once said) and John helped teach Pam to drive. The two of them would travel to churches together to promote the work of Wycliffe and it was returning from one such meeting on a cold January night that John asked Pam to marry him. The following summer, they both taught on the linguistics course, right up until the day before they were married. A month later, they sailed for Peru, where John they would live and minister amongst the Jebero people and where John would carry out the research work for his PhD.

*"September 1955 through September 1956 was a honeymoon for us both in a double sense. Not only for our marriage but for our initiation into the delights of linguistic fieldwork. We can thoroughly recommend Amazonia on both counts! We could hardly have been in a more remote place—three weeks by river travel from the SIL Centre at Yarinacocha just outside Pucalpa. Fortunately that long journey was reduced to two and a half hours in the small SIL plane.*

*We didn't take much with us to the little town of Jebero. The small, single-engine plane that took us to a landing strip outside Jebero couldn't carry much in addition to us, but we thought we were well equipped with our battery-operated reel-to-reel tape-recorder and an Olympia typewriter with some of its keys modified with some commonly used phonetic symbols, together with our one enamel mug*

*and plate apiece and our mosquito net and safari bed! I smile now, as I think of the laptops and solar panels we use in our linguistic research today.*

*We lived alongside the villagers, eating local food and taking our daily bath as they did, in the main stream which flowed along the edges of the little town. Such living gave us good opportunities to learn their language and study their culture. Painstakingly over the months that followed we began to speak Jebero.*

*One of the foundational elements of our study of Jebero was a collection of over 100 stories of all kinds that we recorded: stories of everyday activities, fables about the jungle animals, especially the puma, accounts of Jebero history, time-honoured legends, and so on. With the indispensable assistance of our Jebero friends, we translated these texts and discussed them in detail, drawing out many of the phonological and grammatical features of the language. Together we devised a (more or less) phonemic alphabet. How they loved to see their language in writing for the first time and enjoyed learning to read it!*

*Our interest in them and their language was very well received. On one occasion when we were visiting the home of one of the leading men, he embarrassed us by asking one of the Peruvian traders, who had spent many years coming and going to the little town and had married a Jebero girl, how much Jebero he knew. When the trader confessed that he hadn't learnt any because it was too difficult, our host pointed to us and exclaimed, "There's Don Juan, he's only been here three months and he knows our language!" We pardoned the gross exaggeration, realising it expressed his appreciation that we were studying his language, whereas most Peruvians despised it."*

Reading John's words about this 'honeymoon year', you can't help but be impressed by the amount that he and Pam achieved despite the very Spartan conditions they were living under. Collecting and transcribing one hundred texts in an unwritten language is a considerable feat. But more striking is John's evident love and concern for the Jebero people. He and Pam could never be disinterested researchers gathering linguistic data. They made friends with the Jebero and they depended on them.

At the end of their year in Peru they returned to London and the following 18 months were spent in "analysis and re-analysis" of the data they had gathered. Eventually in 1958, John's defended his thesis entitled "The structure and function of the verbal piece in the Jebero language" and was awarded his doctorate.

He and Pam returned to South America shortly afterwards, this time to Brazil where they studied the Terena language in the Mato Grosso in Brazil. John would continue to publish articles on Terena grammar over the next few years, but their stay in Brazil was soon to be cut short.

In 1960, the leadership of SIL decided that it was time to consider starting work in Africa and John was sent to explore the possibilities. John applied the same energy and enthusiasm to this task as he had done to promoting Wycliffe in Britain, years before. Though this time on a much larger scale: a motorbike was certainly not sufficient to cover Africa.

In 1962 the Bendor-Samuel family moved to Africa; living first in Ghana and later on in Nigeria, where they were based for fourteen years. From Nigeria, John directed SIL's work in West Africa which expanded to Togo (1967), Cameroon (1968) and Ivory Coast (1968). In the 1970's as the Africa

Area Director of SIL, he visited many countries, discussing with church and missions leaders the needs for future Bible translation work. He was responsible for starting work in Ethiopia (1974), Sudan (1975), Kenya, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Chad, Zaire, Morocco, Congo Brazzaville, Central African Republic and Mozambique. John described the linguist aspect of his work as follows:

*“In the north of Ghana, I found there were at least 15 languages without any Scriptures and for the most part with little or no linguistic research having been carried out. I also found out that the Government was not interested in the kind of partnership that had served us well in other parts of the world and I was referred by Government officials to the University.*

*At that time, the University of Ghana had just begun establishing a new institute—The Institute of African Studies. This Institute was to include the study of African languages and welcomed the possibility of cooperation. So we were able to conclude a cooperative agreement with the University, which served as the basis for our work in Ghana. I was recognised as an “Associate Fellow” of the Institute and we were able to use University housing. Six months later, with work begun in some six languages, it was time for our first linguistic workshop and this was held on the premises of the University at no charge to us.*

*The sixties were an exciting time for language study in West Africa. New universities were founded and Departments of Linguistics established. The West Africa Linguistics Society was founded in 1965 and I served on its Council for 35 years. WALs ran an annual congress to stimulate the study of African languages. Those Congresses, though now on a two-yearly cycle, continue to this day. The Society published a journal, the Journal of West African Languages, with two issues every year. I served as Editor for twelve years (1982-1993) and have been encouraged to see both the steadily improving quality of articles submitted to the Journal and a significant increase in the number of articles that are written by African scholars working in West African institutions. A new generation of Africans, competent in linguistics and enthusiastically committed to the study of the languages of their countries, was growing up and it was an inspiration to work with them.*

*In addition to providing linguistic stimulus and a growing understanding of African languages, these WALs Congresses gave opportunities to meet scholars from many African countries. Editing the Journal also kept me in touch with many scholars, as did organising and editing the volume on Niger-Congo Languages published in 1989—still the most comprehensive introduction to what is probably the largest language family in the world, with over 1600 separate languages.*

*By 1967, we had 19 teams working in Ghana and Nigeria. Then the Biafran civil war broke out. Almost all our teams in Nigeria were in the war zone and had to withdraw. Some of the languages we were working in extended into Cameroon, so I went to Cameroon and looked up a scholar at the University of Yaounde, whom I had met at the WALs Congress two years before. He introduced me cooperative agreement between SIL and the University with Government approval. Within a week of my departure, my friend left—he had only come back after his summer vacation for four weeks to clear up his belongings, as he was taking up a new appointment in Singapore. God’s timing has amazed me over and over again. His last four weeks in Cameroon were just the opportunity I needed and matched the time I could be there. The start of work in each country in Africa has been different but one common factor has been God’s providential matching of time and people. This has both strengthened my own faith and reminded me many times that this work is His work not mine.*

*Again, it was our linguistics that enabled us to re-establish our work in Nigeria through a cooperative agreement with Ahmadu Belo University in the north. It was a scholar I had met at a WALC Congress who facilitated this.*

*My linguistics was put to very good use, as the work spread to 20 countries in 20 years. In going to a country for the first time, I would contact and gather information from all sorts of sources— Government officials, university staff and church leaders. Then I would do my own first rough and ready “task assessment”. I came away with a sketch of the language situation, the relationships between the languages, population details, the religious situation, language attitudes and other sociolinguistic factors which had a bearing on translation needs. Not a full-length portrait but a simple snapshot, sufficient for us to make initial plans which would need to be refined, corrected and expanded later. I couldn’t have done it without my linguistics.*

*Besides setting up the basis for the work in a country, I used to visit our new teams twice a year and would include linguistic guidance alongside personal oversight, until there was a nucleus of members in the country and a new administration was in place.”*

Typically, John does not mention the difficulties of travelling in Africa, the strain of being away from home and family for long stretches and the challenge of turning up in a new city without knowing anyone or even speaking the language. John’s deep faith and trust in God and his winning way with people were instrumental in carrying him through situations which would have exhausted most people.

John trusted the Lord to achieve great things and this meant that he was willing to overcome immense challenges in his life and ministry. Not only that, but he encouraged others to do the same. SIL colleagues from the early years in Africa recall that whenever they asked for John’s permission to do something, he would reply “by all means, go ahead”. This phrase became so famous that the SIL group in Abidjan Ivory Coast actually taught someone’s pet parrot to say “by all means, go ahead”. Twenty years later ‘old timers’ still fondly recalled John’s faith and trust in God, typified by those four words.

John was deeply respected and trusted by the Africans he met and worked with across the continent and he repaid that respect in kind. One of his particular concerns was the need for Bible translation to be owned by the Churches and people of the different countries across Africa. The Dictionary of Africa Biography says:

*John Bendor-Samuel encouraged the formation of local organizations with their own governing bodies. He has vigorously promoted and fostered local partnerships with both governmental and non-governmental agencies, with University departments, with churches and church leaders, with mission agencies, and with local Bible Societies. In Nigeria SIL work was transferred to the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust in 1976, and in Ghana to the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation in 1979. In Kenya from the outset of SIL’s work, the Kenyan organization, Bible Translation and Literacy (East Africa) was in charge. These national Bible translation organizations cooperate with the local Bible Society, but exercise a complementary ministry, focusing on languages where no Bible translation has been undertaken. There are now local translation organizations in nine African countries.*

For most people, a busy life travelling across Africa would have been more than they could handle, but for much of the time that John was Director of SIL in Africa, he was also responsible for the SIL summer schools in the UK. By now, the summer schools were held at the Wycliffe Centre in Horsleys Green, Buckinghamshire. John and Pam were able to buy a house close to the centre, and the summer months in England provided a relatively peaceful time for the family after the hectic months in Africa. The regular teaching stint was also important in that the contact with the staff and students served to re-energise John's love for the academic study of linguists. Not only that, but John used his experience running training in the UK to launch linguistics training courses for Africans across the continent.

In 1984, the Bendor-Samuels started a new phase in their life when John was appointed Executive Vice-President of SIL International, a role which he occupied until 1991. The change in role meant that the John and Pam had to relocate to Dallas and also brought to a close John's time as director of the SIL School in the UK.

As the executive officer of a major mission agency, John was called upon to play a role in large international meetings and conferences. During his time as EVP he spoke at the Urbana Missions Congress in the US and participated at both first AD 2000 meeting in Singapore and the second Lausanne Congress in Manila.

Perhaps John's major contribution to the world mission movement at this point was the establishment of the Forum of Bible Agencies. Together with Fergus MacDonald of the United Bible societies, John called a meeting of various agencies involved in the translation and distribution of the Scriptures. Since the first meeting at Horsleys Green in 1990, the Forum of Bible Agencies has grown into an international fellowship of 25 organisations. It is a mark of the success of the Forum that FOBA developed and led the Scripture in Mission track at the recent Lausanne 3 Congress. The growth and success of FOBA is in no small part due to the visionary leadership of John Bendor-Samuel in its early days.

However, though he was in demand on the international stage, most of John's time and energy were devoted to his role as EVP of SIL International. As Africa Area director, he had tirelessly crossed the continent, encouraging those involved in Bible translation and language development work and seeking out opportunities to start new works. As EVP, he continued much in the same vein, though now his canvas was worldwide, rather than just continent wide. Each year he would visit a number of different SIL branches in different parts of the world. Sometimes he would be invited as a conference speaker and at others he would visit purely to encourage the staff on the ground and to learn more about the issues they were facing.

One particular privilege was to visit Ghana in September 1987 to attend the celebrations for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the work in the country. It must have been remarkable for John to be able to look back on the quarter-century since had first visited Ghana and to see all of the progress that had happened since.

In 1992, having stepped down as EVP of SIL International, John was elected by the members of Wycliffe Bible Translators in the UK. However, the fact that his role was based in the UK, did not mean that John was no longer involved on the world stage. He continued his involvement with the AD 2000 movement, taught a course on overseas mission studies in Canada and continued to be

very involved in the running of the Forum of Bible Agencies. In 1997, John chaired the God's Word and Literature track at the Global Consultation on World Evangelism (GCOWE) in Korea. Four thousand delegates from almost two hundred countries attended that meeting. During his time as Director of Wycliffe UK, John continued to participate in international mission conferences both in the UK and around the world.

John launched a number of innovative initiatives during his time as Director of Wycliffe UK. These included the Literacy and Development Liaison Unit, an academic group at the heart of Wycliffe UK which was involved in seeking for government and institutional funding for literacy and language development work around the world. Ultimately, this group was not particularly successful, owing to the particular climate relative to funding in Britain. However, it was to provide a model for fund raising in other European countries and now, institutional funding is one of the most important strands to raising support for Wycliffe and SIL across the continent.

The Special Assignment Literacy Teams (SALT) were an attempt to build on the desire of young people to work together in teams and to contribute to the development effort in the majority world. Teams of young people were recruited to work in a specific language project somewhere in the world, and after a period of training they would spend a year helping with literacy in the language project. Recruiting teams proved to be extremely difficult, but those who were sent out made a huge contribution to the projects to which they were assigned as well as experiencing an unforgettable time in their lives.

Perhaps John's most important innovation was what he called Vision 20, but which is now termed In Focus. This is a programme by which Churches in the UK are linked to Bible translation programmes around the world and support those programmes through prayer and financial support. This programme is still central to the work of Wycliffe in the UK. Today the concept of In Focus seems perfectly normal, but at the time it was launched it marked a radical departure for an organisation which had previously restricted its involvement in mission work to recruiting, training and sending missionaries. It was no accident that his main innovation for Wycliffe UK was one which sought to bring a degree of autonomy to local Bible translators around the world and to allow them to take charge of their own programmes.

During his time as Director, John invested heavily in a number of the younger Wycliffe staff, bringing them on into leadership roles and helping them to grow in confidence and ability. One colleague remarked; "I would not be where I am today if John had not seen some potential in me that I wasn't aware of at the time. He is the best boss I have ever had."

Later, John was elected president of Wycliffe International. This meant that in addition to his duties as Wycliffe UK director, he also had to organise and chair the board meetings for the International organisation as well as act as the public face of Wycliffe worldwide. This added considerably to the amount of international travel he was called on to do.

In 1999 John stepped down as director of Wycliffe UK and in the same year, he was not re-elected as WBTI president. For a while it was far from clear to John and Pam what their next step should be. While they prayed and waited for guidance from God, John continued working; including speaking at a missionary conference in Barbados and co-chairing the FOBA meetings.

During their careers, John and Pam worked with two organisations which are distinct, but who have a close working relationship. SIL is a non-sectarian organisation which does language development and translation work around the world. Wycliffe Bible Translators is a Christian organisation which promotes the needs of Bible translation and language development and which recruits people and raises funds to support the work. Through the 1960s and 70s John had worked as SIL Africa Area director, overseeing the work of expatriate workers in linguistics and Bible translation. However, by the year 2000, not least due to John's efforts in promoting national organisations, there were a significant number of Wycliffe Organisations present on the African continent. These organisations were responsible for promoting Bible translation work among the churches in their own countries and for carrying out language programmes. In 2000, John was appointed to the newly created role of Wycliffe Africa Area director.

He saw his role as developing strategies to help the urban churches in Africa participate in the Great Commission (particularly through Bible translation), to help develop organisations and structures to support Bible translation in each country and to do so in a way which could be adapted to other situations. So, forty years on, John found himself once more travelling across Africa encouraging an openness to Bible translation work.

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