

Transformed Hearts, Transformed Lives

by Dave Pearson

Information Poverty Kills!

Anée wept bitterly as she held her baby close to her chest. She was filled with a confusion of anger, grief and guilt. She was supposed to have taken the medicine herself and the baby would have benefitted through her milk. But she didn't understand the doctor's instructions, and she can't read, so she gave the medicine directly to her baby. Her newborn daughter died from a tragic and avoidable overdose. Information poverty kills.

Anée was the wife of our night guard, Beltoise when we lived in Chad. Their angry grief made me angry too. The doctor should have known that 80% of Chadian women are illiterate. He should have known that she probably needed to be told what to do. Anée had been to primary school, but since everything was in French she had understood so little that by the time she left she was still unable to read. Children who learn to read and write in their mother tongue before bridging to the official language flourish and fly, while those who have to do it all in French often flounder and fail. It still troubles me that while in the UK only six children out of 1,000 live births die before the age of five, in Chad it's 200 children. So many of those deaths are avoidable. There is a direct link between mothers being able to read and infant mortality. Mothers who can read have children who live longer.

Hope for the future

But there is hope! The Chadian government is starting to explore teaching in the mother tongue in primary school. They are also promoting the use of Chadian languages for adult literacy. But that can't happen without the right resources. For decades Wycliffe staff have been analysing languages and producing guides to understanding grammar, dictionaries and literacy materials. These are essential to good Bible translation, but they are invaluable for multilingual schools too.

Our work in many developing countries is not only enabling people to find spiritual healing and nourishment, but physical healing and nourishment too. One of the booklets our teams translated into several languages of Chad was a very simple guide on how to treat a baby with diarrhoea. It's so simple: sterile water, salt and sugar can save the life of a sick child. In the 15 years since it was translated that little booklet has probably saved hundreds of lives. To quote Nobel Prize winner Sir William Lewis "The fundamental cure for poverty is not money but knowledge".

The pendulum effect

I really enjoyed watching Alice in Wonderland at the cinema with my wife and children earlier this year. "Contrariwise" said Tweedledee as he bickered with Tweedledum. Two people contradicting each other just for the sake of it makes for entertaining comedy, but it's a disastrous way to develop theology. Somebody overstates their case, so somebody else feels the need to counter that position by overstating an opposing view. Before long we have polarised an argument into two unbiblical, but firmly-held positions.

Parts of the church have done this with evangelism and social action, promoting one to the exclusion of the

other. This was starkly illustrated last month by an American TV show host who encouraged Christians to leave churches that worked for “social justice” because he believed it to be just a code for “communism”! Any church that treats a person as either just-a-soul-that-needs-saving, or just-a-body-that-needs-feeding has definitely lost the plot. Jesus both taught and fed the five thousand.

Wycliffe’s Integral Mission

Wycliffe Bible Translators in the UK is a member of an international family of organisations called Wycliffe Bible Translators International (WBTI). WBTI is a member of the Micah Network, a group of over 300 Christian agencies committed to Integral Mission. Integral mission is “the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world we betray the word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and structural change belong together.” (micahnetwork.org).

Wycliffe’s language development work produces transformed lives through the translated Word and through translated development information. People grow better crops and live better lives. They care for their environment and they care for their neighbours. They learn about justification by faith and oral rehydration solution. Wycliffe’s work brings both spiritual and material blessing.

Development agencies such as World Vision and Save the Children are increasingly paying attention to these issues. My current role involves working with such agencies to help them better understand the roles culture and language can play in development. So is Wycliffe becoming a development agency? No, our core purpose is still clearly in focus, but we are not blind to the broader consequences of our work. Language development is holistic ministry, meeting the needs of people who still have both body and soul.

Dave Pearson was Director of the Chad Branch of SIL from 1991 to 1998. He currently serves as a Language Development Advocate, helping UN agencies and NGOs to better integrate language issues into their development work.

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[Wycliffe Bible Translators](#), the UK’s biggest Bible translation organisation, works with partners worldwide to ensure that every community around the world has access to a Bible in a language that they can fully understand. In more than 70 years of history they have been involved in the translation of 759 New Testaments and Bibles, reaching around 107 million people. Since 1999, Wycliffe has contributed to over 80% of translation projects started in Bibleless people groups. However there remains a massive need, as statistics show that there are around 353 million people from 2,252 languages still waiting for translation to begin.

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Photos can be downloaded from: www.wycliffe.org.uk/pressreleases

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