



Lutheran Bible
Translators

The Relay

Grossmann Prayer letter



July 2023

This letter will be a bit different from my usual as it seeks to wrestle with some of the questions that translators, missionaries, and their sending agencies must wrestle with on a regular and sometimes not so regular basis. The word “wrestle” may give you a sense of foreshadowing that while we may examine questions, there may not be clear answers. Answers may even differ depending on context. Even the list of questions is never complete. The world and technology are in a constant process of change. There is always the question of whether or not we are even asking the right questions!

A supporting partner of mine asked, “...**how does LBT maintain its distinctive Lutheran principles when working with Bible societies or bring its distinctive Lutheran principles to the task of translation** when working with Bible societies....assuming these societies can be a mixed group of Christian and non-Christian interests focused on the need for scripture, but not necessarily of doctrinal unity?” This is a very good question. LBT started with the purpose of connecting Lutheran churches located in America with Bible translation work. The “Lutheran” part of us is about those who serve as missionaries and those who support them. Although the latter are not restricted to being Lutheran, the former are. But my friend’s question has more to do with how we are Lutheran in the fields where we serve. In some places we are in a formal arrangement with Lutheran churches in the area. But in many places, no Lutheran church exists or is one denomination among many. In all the places we serve, we want the church at large regardless of denominational affiliation to accept and use the scripture being translated and to join in literacy efforts. Unchurched folks are also our audience. More on this in a bit.

Other questions are also being asked. A partner Bible translation group is assessing how strategies might be developed to speed up current progress to reach goals of giving access to a portion of Scripture to 100% of the world population and access to a full Bible for 95% of the world’s population by 2033. At current rates of progress, these goals cannot be met. New technologies like artificial intelligence or AI and crowdsourcing are being tested. Their use may free up time so translators can focus on other activities encouraging Scripture use and/or where human interaction is required. AI has been in the news a lot lately. Texts that are generated can be quite accurate, or they can contain information that is false but still sound very convincing. Some of us at LBT have watched some demonstrations of new software that “learns”

from current translated materials and generates new text and links to our current software in the hopes of speeding up some of the tedious but essential processes of translation. We are asking lots of questions: Will a computer-generated text be easier to edit or more time-consuming? How will it be accepted by the community? Will translators feel their jobs are being threatened? In many communities the acceptability and integrity of the translation is not found in just the text, but in the people producing it. If the text is computer generated in whole or in part, will this integrity be lost? Will the technology force one interpretation when the text needs to speak to several interpretations? How will context be observed? Will the creative and/or inspirational aspects of translation be lost?

Jesus tells us **the harvest is plentiful, go and make disciples**. But what should be our strategy for making sure people have God’s word? At one time, LBT focused on places that requested our partnership. But what about places where people are not interested in making that request? What about places that don’t have enough Christian presence to know they need the Bible in their language? Should we just ignore them? **They still need Jesus**. We have been surveying several dialects in the Grebo area of Liberia. Translated scripture is available, but only in a single dialect or English. No Grebo people are requesting translation or literacy work in the other dialects. However, some agencies, observing the size of the population, see this as a priority group for translation work. They are even offering to fund translation. Should a project be started before the people themselves see it as important? Is this a case where outsiders are telling the insiders what to do, or is it a means of going out into the harvest? Should the local Bible society accept the funding and start the project as a way to keep their whole operation afloat for the greater good of all the translation work in the country hoping as well that the process and end product will encourage faith in that community? If a new project is begun, should it focus on written scripture or oral? Should translation or literacy be the starting point?

Getting back to the original question—one of our missionaries responded by pointing out the Lutheran hermeneutic of letting scripture interpret scripture. We strive to let the scriptures speak for themselves without inserting our own interpretations into the text, without adding to or taking away from the original meaning in its

I have so much to do today, I'll need to spend another hour on my knees. (Luther)

context. Where the text could take on multiple interpretations, we seek to translate in such a way that the same breadth of interpretations is still possible in the target language. Another colleague shared **that our being Lutheran removes a barrier with Lutheran leaders in other countries** when it comes to their support and involvement in Bible translation. This in turn leads to exchanges with leaders in other denominations influencing them to support translation efforts and **creating opportunities** to encourage Bible translation at the community level across denominations.

As Lutherans our identity is grounded in the Word of God. Making God's word accessible is engrained in our history. Luther sought to make God's word accessible to everyone, particularly the common folks. "...we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them." (Luther's Works 35:189). He also recognized that good translation is not done by just anybody. A translator needs proper understanding of the whole text. Luther's German translation was sound from scholarly, linguistic and literary standpoints, making it the preferred German translation among many. Luther's translation was even adapted for use by the Catholic church of the day. It inspired other language translations including English. We are carrying on the heritage we received.

Another way LBT follows in Luther's footsteps is the strong emphasis the organization places on training both our missionaries and the translators that work in the projects. Some of our international partners have traveled abroad to receive advanced education. We partner with Mekane Yesus Seminary in Ethiopia to train pastors in Bible translation principles. How much formal training is necessary for a native speaker of the target language is yet another question being asked.

Luther also humbly knew that no translation is completely objective and without bias. "For Luther, the purpose of translation is to let God's word speak clearly. **Translation** is not primarily or only a scholarly, linguistic, or literary achievement. **It is successful when it clearly communicates God's word. Translation is only a beginning! It is never an end in itself, but intended to facilitate engagement with God's Word, Jesus Christ.**" (Haemig 2011)

LBT's vision is to produce Scripture that will inspire "a vibrant Christian community deeply rooted in God's word, engaging fully in God's mission in this generation." LBT is asking what opportunities do we have to make God's

word accessible to all people? What barriers are getting in the way? How do we remove them? How do we use data to inform our decisions and planning processes so that the vision can take effect? **Our strategy now is prayer.** Prayer to find answers and to be faithful to the Word. Prayers for people to find their Savior and be engaged with the WORD, written and divine. (Rudowske 2023)

Thank you for your prayers. As you can see much wisdom is needed as we "wrestle" through opportunities and planning, implementing and stewarding all our resources. When I call you supporting partners, I intend the title to reflect the reliance of LBT on the fact that your voices join us in these prayers. I can not thank you enough, both for your personal support of me and for the concern you show for each person waiting to hear God's Word.

Becky



From L to R Becky, Charles, Mary, friend and family of my colleague and consultant Don Slager– May 2023, Monrovia, Liberia

PRAYER REQUESTS

- Pray for sufficient power sources to be installed in all the projects.
- Praise for the June online checking, making progress in 2 Chronicles and Ezekiel.
- Pray for the Bandi team as they bond their Monrovia team with the Lofa team.
- Pray for Charles to get his foot soon, for Mary and her back pain, for safety and good health for all
- Pray for a peaceful election year in Liberia.
- Pray and let God worry. (Luther)

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Becky is **YOUR HEART IN ACTION**. She serves you as a consultant for translation teams in Liberia, West Africa by using your prayers and support to fulfill your desire to "PUT GOD'S WORD IN THEIR HANDS." Becky rejoices that she is part of your Lutheran Bible Translators team and values this special relationship.