


# A missiology of progress: Assessing advancement in the Bible translation movement

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Statistical analysis has been a common method for determining progress in missional activity. In the case of Bible translation, measurable statistics have been readily available showing progress. However, there have been gaps such as biblical, sociological, theological and missiological factors. The aim of this study is to consider broader factors than just quantifiable measurements that could be used to develop a missiological foundation for missional progress, especially for Bible translation. The setting was to analyse inputs from leaders within the Bible translation movement in terms of their understanding of the factors to be considered for a missiology of progress. Using a qualitative study based upon a questionnaire, the researcher grouped the responses by common categories and then analysed the key findings. The qualitative nature of how Bible translation was conducted reveals important factors such as signs of increased collaboration between Bible translation agencies, improved quality of relationships between Bible translation agencies and the local church, and also theologically significant milestones. The study concludes that progress in the Bible translation movement has to be considered within the broader context of God's mission. Church history has revealed how progress in one era could be regress in another era. Consequently, reflecting and learning together within the Bible translation movement has been a key to progress, and therefore, all participants in the Bible translation movement have been called to work and learn together.

**Keywords:** global mission; mission history; Bible translation; missional progress; *missio Dei*.

## Introduction

Using statistics has been a common method for determining the state of progress, as we have been told, 'you are what you measure' or 'what gets measured counts'. Applied missionally, Higgins (2010) noted how efforts to:

[C]omplete the Great Commission [*have*] successively reworked its terminology and methodology. One major emphasis has been the collection of data about people groups and the status of evangelization and Christian expansion. Depending upon the researcher or the specific database in question, such data may include percentages of exposure to the Gospel, resources of literature available in a people group, the status of church planting, etc. (p. 127)

A more complex example comes from church historian Stanley (2018:10), who noted how '[t]he twentieth century did not quite turn out to be the century of Christian missionary triumph that the founders of the *Christian Century* [i.e. the 20th century] fondly imagined'. Near the start of that century, during the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910, conference chairman John R. Mott proclaimed that all available resources would be quickly deployed to support a missionary conquest to the ends of the earth. The conference was initiating a comprehensive plan for evangelisation that would see the world completely 'reached' in the foreseeable future.

For a number of very complex sociological, geo-political and religious reasons, this bold vision was not achieved. Stanley (2018:10) pointed out: 'Statistical estimates suggest that in percentage terms Christians accounted for a slightly lower percentage of the world population in 2000 than they had at the beginning of the century'. Sourcing the World Christian Database, Stanley (2018:10) noted that the global percentage of Christians 'fell from 34.46 percent in 1900 to 32.65 percent in 2005'. Rather than progress, there was regress.

Declaring bold pronouncements of progress in God's mission, as well intended as they may be, is not a wise tactic. This should humble our attempts at considering what progress looks like in mission. Livermore (2015:213) brought this clarity: 'What do we want to measure? What valid, reliable tools exist to measure this?'

It is one thing to measure the growth of the church as Stanley has done; it is another to determine how to measure progress in the Bible translation movement. In the latter, there are annual statistical updates on the state and the need of Bible translation (e.g. see <https://www.wycliffe.net/en/statistics>).

Statistics that can be helpful include how many languages already have adequate access to Scriptures, how much Bible translation work is underway, how many languages we are fairly certain still need Bible translation, how many complete Bibles have been translated and so forth. These measurements are quantitative. Does that provide a complete enough picture? Are there qualitative factors that are equally as important when considering a missiology of progress?

## Research method and design

The question of broadening the criteria for determining progress in the *missio Dei*, and in particular to Bible translation, is the research problem that is explored. The research aims to answer whether a qualitative missiology of progress can be developed that will serve the Bible translation movement and beyond that relies less on quantitative statistics (because these are readily available).

The research was conducted in January 2019 – February 2019 through an online questionnaire developed by the author. Thirty-two leaders of Bible translation organisations primarily affiliated with the Wycliffe Global Alliance were approached. Twenty-four responded: 58% from the Global North and 42% from the Global South. The researcher asked three questions: (1) How do we know what God considers to be progress in the Bible translation movement? (2) What milestones are theologically significant for the Bible translation movement in the coming decades? and (3) What milestones will we cross together in the Bible translation movement in the coming years?

The responses to the questionnaire provide data that were analysed and grouped according to the questions, resulting in subthemes and topics. This informs the conclusions that answer the research problem. For referencing purposes, 'PN' equals Participant Number, the date of the response, and the global location of the participant: 'GN' is Global North and 'GS' is Global South.

## Defining progress

The meaning of 'progress' expresses the concepts of advancement, breakthrough or 'movement towards a goal' (Dictionary.com: n.d.). Consequently, when 'progress' is used within the context of God's mission and the Bible translation movement, one is attempting to describe that goals are advancing and something significant is happening. This is intended to carry an overall positive connotation.

Godin (2019:n.p.) raises the concern that more data are not what is missing to solve challenges. Instead, 'more insight, more innovation and better eyes' is required. In other words,

discernment is what is needed to turn data into information from which 'useful truth' is extracted.

With this in mind, we look at the first question asked in the survey: question 1: how do we know what God considers to be progress in the Bible translation movement?

## Progress in the Bible

What glimpses of the concept of progress do the Bible give to inform the question? Survey participants offered their reflections on these passages as examples:

The Apostle John writes in Revelation 7:9–10 (NET):

... [H]ere was an enormous crowd that no one could count, made up of persons from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb ...

Viewing this through a grid of progress, one sees:

'[M]ore people able to praise God's name in their own language; and ... more people knowing [God] in their own language, with the ultimate goal that more people will be real followers of Christ.' (PN8, 22 March 2019, GN)

Also noted is how Jesus is 'building this global church which will last forever. So, we believe that work which supports this agenda is worthwhile because it is in line with [Jesus'] purposes'.

Habakkuk 2:14 (NIV) states: '[f]or the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea'. The application suggested: 'Bible translation constitutes an essential contribution ... and fulfilment ... to spreading the knowledge of the Lord'.

The Apostle Paul writes in Colossians 1:24–29 (NIV): '[t]o them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory'. The application in progress can be seen as 'more people having access to Scripture, which is a source of the knowledge of God'.

The Gospel of Luke 10:21 (NIV) states: 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children'. When the 70 return and give Jesus a report, 'his reply seems to focus on something that has been taken for granted, gratitude to God for what he has done for us'. Therefore, 'out of gratitude we share this with others, which is the best motive'.

The evangelist Philip in Acts 8:38 encountered and baptised the eunuch, which according to Craig Ott (2019:100) is attributed as a key factor in the gospel being taken to and accepted in the Kingdom of Nubia (Sudan and South Sudan) and perhaps Ethiopia. In Acts 9:31 (NIV), there is a mention of the church 'throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria', noting 'it increased in numbers', which indicates the growth of the church out of Jerusalem. And of course, the Apostle

Paul's three missionary journeys chart a progression of new communities, cities and regions being evangelised. The parallel in the Bible translation movement can be more and more communities engaged in the movement. In other words, progress in God's eyes could be 'transformation through God's Word received by new groups of people that come to know God'.

Growth in and greater understanding of the Scriptures are mentioned in many encounters in Acts, such as in 16:15, 40 (NIV) when Paul encountered Lydia, who is identified as a 'believer in the Lord'. Afterwards, Paul and Silas returned to Lydia's home and 'met with the brothers and sisters and encouraged them', which indicates a growing hunger for God's Word. Later, in Acts 17:11, Paul encountered the Berean Jews who received the gospel 'with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true'. The parallel for the Bible translation movement can be a growth in engagement with the Scripture. In other words, progress in God's eyes could be 'transformation through God's Word received by new groups of people that come to know God'.

In summary, discerning useful truth leads to a variety of references to support an understanding of how progress is defined and described in the Bible. Examples include how a variety of historical messengers were active in the process of expanding God's kingdom, and how God imbued the notion of progress in visions recorded in Scriptures such as Revelation and Habakkuk.

## Progress in the mission of God (*missio Dei*)

How is progress defined in relation to the mission of God? In general terms, the *missio Dei* is God's purpose of redemption and reconciliation of all that was lost through the fall. God's instrument for mission is the universal church, whom he invites to join him. A participant notes:

'God desires to see the church communicate this mission in ways that present him as a Father to people in different languages and cultures and these people embrace him thus and not as a stranger. In some areas, the church has understood this and it is the church that seeks Bible translation done in the languages and cultures where it is found.' (PN24, 25 March 2019, GS)

Consequently, '[f]aithful, biblical, theological and missional progress means that Bible translation is progressing the way it is meant to – fitting in with the purpose and mission of God'.

A participant suggested, however:

'[W]e cannot know how God intends to achieve his plans. For example, humanly speaking, we look for success with our strategies. But God may have a deeper plan to glorify himself and achieve his purposes through our weakness and failings.'

Bible translation can be viewed as having an 'incarnational impact [*that is displayed in*] the quality of relationships and partnerships involved in the process'.

A participant adds:

'[T]he Bible does not lead us to believe that Bible translation is inherently valuable as an end in itself: it is the proclamation of God's Word, and its application to people's lives, which is valuable. So, if we were to measure progress, we would need to measure it by ministry usefulness, and not by a simple count of languages or translations completed.' (PN6, 16 March 2019, GN)

At a basic level, progress happens:

'[W]hen people are able to access the Word of God in their heart language. Generally, this means Old and New Testaments. For oral cultures it also means the Scriptures available in oral forms. But there is a bigger story than simply "availability". This is the story of people within a language group owning the process of translation and Scripture use as a fundamental part of their church life. Such ownership, capability and capacity development enable people to continue to be involved in ongoing translation and revision and alongside this, the local theologising that comes from deep engagement with the Word in their specific contexts.' (PN11, 18 March 2019, GN)

Progress is seen when the church 'is emerging from the translated Word'; when 'local bodies of believers have made their own decisions of what language(s) serves them best for connecting with God'; when exercising an 'informed choice of what language best incarnates Jesus in the Word for them'; and when there is a notable increased [*commitment*] to 'serve the church.'

Progress in language communities is obvious when 'lives, communities, nations [*are*] transformed by His Word; [*when*] His Word [*is*] being used by the communities and impacting all spheres of life'; and:

'[W]hen the community is leading from the front and it is deciding what's best; when the community is prepared to make the sacrifice; and when the community is using their own economy to make things happen.' (PN15, 25 March 2019, GS)

It happens when 'the community is involved in the translation process – as reviewers and supporters'. It occurs when 'translated Scriptures are available in formats that the community can engage with: book, audio or video, digital formats, etc.' Progress in the community is noted when there is 'regular interaction with the Scriptures' because there's the 'availability of the Scriptures in a language that people can best understand and in a form that's easy to engage with, and people are empowered to use those Scriptures'. Progress happens when we are 'serving not only prestigious groups, but poor, marginalized and "forgotten" groups' (e.g. serving deaf communities).

Progress for Bible agencies benefits from the work of Crutchfield and Grant McLeod (2012:7) who noted how 'success is found when non-profits strive to create collective impact ... and thus are able to achieve greater results than any one player could achieve alone'. The implication for the Bible translation movement is for participants to change their collaborative efforts to share objectives with each other and hold each other accountable for these goals.

A participant notes how progress happens:

'[W]hen more leaders and organizations are working in unity, expressing God's love for one another, and serving in collaboration ... in the context of peace ... in a way that glorifies him.'

Importantly:

'[P]rogress in Bible translation as a phenomenon is when Christians and Christian leaders globally are convicted and committed to Bible translation as an indispensable part of cross-cultural mission where there is a need for it, and that Bible translation is an indivisible part of the *Missio Dei* that each church must commit to whether within or without their context.'

Determining what to measure, or why it should be measured, is not straightforward. Intentionally creating spaces for reflective practice allows God to 'influence our practice', and it helps us to calmly determine what we measure and how we do so. As a participant noted:

'There are so many things that can be counted, and I don't think it's wrong to talk about numbers of people and organisations involved in the Bible translation movement. But ... it's not just about what God has called us to do, but also the way in which we do it.'

Progress in the Bible translation movement can be considered from the perspective of God's kingdom when 'Jesus [*is*] worshiped as Lord, [*there's*] love for one another, generosity, collaboration, humility, [*and*] the Gospel presented to all people(s)'. The implication is progress has to be considered against values such as an increase in 'unity, respect, and love ... and that everyone would be treated with dignity and respect regardless of ethnicity, gender or socio-economic standing'.

There are also these factors to consider when measuring growth in the Bible translation movement:

'*Shalom* increases, when God's Kingdom grows; when unity in His body is strengthened; when His name is more glorified, His lordship more recognized among the nations; and when His [*powerful*] word is [*spread*] more broadly throughout His church.' (PN3, 23 March 2019, GN)

A participant suggests, 'productivity metrics [*in translation*] have their value and it's good to aim for specific production goals, because people need access to God's Word as soon as possible'. But 'participation counts more than productivity'. Indicators of progress need to:

'[I]nclude increased participation and leadership on the part of the end-user church and community, and improved relationships between all stakeholders. For example: Measurable progress of direct church involvement in Bible translation (i.e. involvement from denominations and seminaries, and church networks increasingly seeing Bible translation as a priority for church growth and maturity); measurable increase in financial contribution; increased collaboration between Bible translation agencies; and improved quality of relationships between Bible translation agencies and the local church.' (PN21, 1 April 2019, GS)

In summary, a number of ways progress is determined with Bible translation in the *missio Dei* include insights of its

effects after it has been translated and made available in various forms to individuals and the church. This includes qualitative factors such as growth in partnerships, greater collaboration among key players and ensuring greater community ownership and involvement in the Bible translation process.

We now look at the second question asked in the survey: what milestones are theologically significant for the Bible translation movement in the coming decades?

## Key findings on significant milestones

Using milestones to define progress may be a helpful approach. A milestone is a 'significant event or stage in the life of a person' (Dictionary.com: n.d.) and, for our purposes, the Bible translation movement. When applying 'milestones' to the Bible translation movement, it raised interesting comments from survey participants: 'Do we actually know what a milestone is until we have arrived at one?' or 'We may not know what God considers to be milestones'; and:

'[I] am a little concerned about the idea of milestones. While we should be strategic in supporting Bible translation in places where it is still needed, I think we will see the markers on the journey more clearly as we look back.' (PN11, 18 March 2019, GN)

as opposed to looking forward when making strategic plans.

As an example of milestones, a participant noted, 'It seems that God leads people through situations and then tells them to remember what he has done, rather than telling them in advance what to expect'. For example, over 3300 years ago Joshua led the people of Israel across the Jordan River. The Lord told Joshua to have someone from each of the 12 tribes to take 12 stones from the middle of the Jordan and place them on dry ground as they crossed over to the Promised Land (Jos 4:1-9). Joshua set up the 12 stones to mark the occasion, and to remind future generations about what God had done for the people of Israel by delivering them to the Promised Land.

An ancient milestone in Bible translation was the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament (OT) from Hebrew into Greek in the third century BCE, commonly known as the LXX (Roman numeral 70). According to tradition, the Septuagint was produced by 70+2 Jewish leaders from Alexandria. This was 'an event without precedence in the ancient world' (Marcos 2000:18) because of the acceptance of the Greek language by the Jewish Diaspora in the Hellenistic world. The Apostle Paul used the Septuagint on his three missionary trips.

A participant observed, 'As best we can tell, we're crossing the milestones already'. For example, it has been nearly 100 years since Francisco Diaz, a Cakchiquel from Guatemala, met William Cameron Townsend and helped him understand that the needs of the Cakchiquel people were very different to the *latinos* (Spanish speakers with European ancestry).

At the time, Townsend had been selling Spanish Bibles, but these were of no use to the Cakchiquel.

An often-overlooked part of the Diaz–Townsend story and the formation of SIL International, and later, Wycliffe Bible Translators, was in fact the friendship between the two men. Diaz and Townsend started a school for Cakchiquel children. This shaped Townsend’s vision of every language group having the Scriptures in their own language. The milestone of the greatest effort in history to translate, publish and distribute the Bible in every language of the world is well underway.

Changes in theologising are another indicator of progress. The contextualisation of the gospel that takes place in and through Bible translation is important. This has relied on the role of the missionary Bible translator as an interpreter. A participant noted an emerging theological approach: ‘The gospel in context [*that is*] identifying the existence of God in our domain culture and identity ... [*shows/points*] the way for authentic transformation’ because it acknowledges God was in the language community ‘before the missionaries arrived’.

There is a shift in the ‘understanding of, and redefinition of, “sending” and “receiving”’ of Bible translation movement personnel. This shift involves newer concepts such as ‘polycentrism, generosity, community and even prayer among God’s people [*in and for*] the Bible translation movement’, and seeks ‘greater participation from the global church’. Consequently, ‘the historic players in the Bible translation movement need to be intentional in leaving room for others to participate’.

### Considering theologically significant milestones

Crutchfield and Grant McLeod (2012) stated:

[W]e get caught up in measuring the wrong things, because the things that really matter are often more difficult to measure ... [T]o achieve greater social change you must also focus on those things that are external to your own organization ... It’s about leveraging every sector of society to become a force for good. (pp. 234–235)

The historic way of measuring a milestone in some circles has been ‘Bible translation started/completed in every language that needs one’; ‘every time sufficient parts of the Bible [are] translated in a specific language for people to come to faith and salvation in Jesus’; ‘when people of all ethnicities and languages worship God before His throne’; ‘availability and access to the Scriptures in the language(s) [*and format*] of people’s choice’ so they can enjoy God’s Word; or ‘the day the “last language” is being started’.

All of these fit the criteria of a significant milestone. However, participants wonder what is a theologically significant one? How many of us have thought of progress and milestones in this regard? A participant suggested any ‘discussion of “theologically significant” milestones probably needs to happen on a broader basis ... as we may need help to get a better grasp on the impact’.

### Theological milestones in local languages and cultural contexts

A participant noted, ‘The New Testament teaches the Old Testament is necessary’. For example, in 2 Timothy 3:16 (NIV), Paul writes: ‘All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness ...’ The Scripture being referred to is the Old Testament. ‘Within the Bible translation movement, we are seeing the deliberate shift from understanding the New Testament or Scripture portions is alone adequate’. In other words, a milestone becomes an ‘increased [*rate of*] whole Bible translation in places that have only had the New Testament’.

Theology needs to become more integrated into the Bible translation movement. As a participant observed:

‘We need to talk of the theologian-translator more and more. This implies the church taking leadership in the movement and Bible translation agencies becoming [*more involved*] with specialized departments of the church. This also means the theological landscape of the church is considered and allowed to shape the movement.’ (PN24, 25 March 2019, GS)

This milestone could be achieved through a deliberate move towards ‘theological reflection in the mother-tongue and Bible literature in languages other than those that have dominated theological discourse in the past’.

A milestone we are seeing is a shift towards greater capability, accessibility and capacity in local churches, as they engage with the Scriptures and apply the Word into their ‘specific cultures to bring new understanding to the local and global church [*so*] that the riches of each culture are brought in captivity to Christ’:

[A] significant milestone is when the ownership and leadership of Bible translation work in a country/region is handed from Westerners to local people/organisations. This is necessary for churches to become self-supporting, self-sustaining, and self-governing. (e.g. the strategies promoted by Henry Venn [1796–1880] and Rufus Anderson [1796–1873])

The greatest milestone we are starting to see is the ‘worldwide church participating more fully in ... unprecedented ways ... to accomplish God’s mission’. Ownership takes place in the following ways:

*In collaboration:*

‘[T]heologically, Bible translation must ... be a part of the local and global church’s mission, and must be carried out in collaboration and partnership with the global and local community of cross-cultural mission and Bible translation practitioners. This is both progress and [*a*] theological milestone for Bible translation in the *Missio Dei*.’ (PN5, 18 March 2019, GS)

*In unity:* ‘When his church works together to carry out his mission, I believe it delights our Father!’ When there is:

‘[U]nity among participants within the Bible translation movement, there’s a genuine joy to collaborate, recognition of each other’s strengths and “successes,” recognition by the global church of this unity and celebration of it.’ (PN3, 23 March 2019, GN)

#### *In listening together:*

‘[T]he trajectory of Bible translation and her participants for the future must include learning to listen together both locally and globally to God’s voice regarding His mission. This would be the foundation and fuel for future development of Bible translation.’ (PN5, 18 March 2019, GS)

#### Busby (2019) wrote:

[M]inistries are becoming more receptive to hearing from the Holy Spirit first and then using strategic planning to carry out God’s plan. But, first, we must master the discipline of stillness ... and be aware of the gentle promptings of the Holy Spirit. (n.p.)

*In humble leadership:* We are continuing to see ‘growing awareness and direct participation and responsibility’ by the Global South church for the Bible translation movement, with greater ‘resource mobilization’ and funding; the church and communities are ‘taking the lead in ownership – holding the power of informed decision making, and participation’.

#### *In scholarship:*

‘[T]here is a growing academia in the church that is interested in Bible translation, and there will be a shift from the less educated to a well-read translator pool and players in the Bible translation movement.’ (PN24, 25 March 2019, GS)

## Changes in local contexts affecting progress

There is an ‘increased voice of local believers in the translation process and in translation decisions’:

‘[S]cripture engagement increasingly happens at the front end of the Bible translation process, rather than near or after completion of the translation. Theologically, this recognises community-engaged Bible translation is, in fact, Scripture engagement.’ (PN21, 1 April 2019, GS)

And viewing ‘Scripture engagement programs as distinct from the Bible translation process unnecessarily delays access to God’s Word’. ‘Where the church is not present or weaker, engaging with Scripture (in whatever form or type) needs to take place as early as possible’.

‘Bible translation agencies no longer decide who needs Scripture, and in what form it will meet the felt need for access to Scripture’. Therefore, a significant theological milestone is the:

‘[A]vailability of Scripture in oral and/or print [*the ‘choice to choose a form that is appropriate’*], in all the languages where end-users have expressed their preference and desire to have it.’ (PN21, 1 April 2019, GS)

The rise of difficult contexts has meant there are still significant needs in ‘difficult access countries with Muslim or

other restricting regimes’. ‘Through the use of local theologies as a result of the available Word [*it is possible to develop*] disciples in hostile environments’. We can expect there to be:

‘[Q]uestions about culture and Christianisation ... What will be the theological answer from us/the church about operating in limited space [*such as*] the sinicization of the Bible [*as evidenced by the*] government approved version in China; or how do we translate and present God’s Word in Muslim contexts?’ (PN8, 22 March 2019, GN)

In other words, the ‘use of culturally understood and identifiable key biblical terms in translation – e.g. use of the name of God’ – are challenges we face.

Our global–regional–national–local contexts are going to keep looking:

‘[D]ifferent in the coming decades to what it has been like in the past. Technology and engineering make more things possible – internet, travel, etc. – but populism, and whatever may come next, is making societies more distrustful of others.’ (PN1, 19 March 2019, GN)

We also see how it is difficult to engage the church in some contexts:

‘[I]n reaching the less reached; [*for example, when*] local outreach and diaconal activities become more popular in our churches in the west, we have a harder time to get them engaged.’ (PN8, 22 March 2019, GN)

In summary, the concept of using milestones to determine events of progress in Bible translation enriches an understanding of the complexities of the process. For example, one sees the integration of scholarship, leadership, collaboration and unity in the church community as essential to the process while simultaneously considering global–regional–local contexts at play. There is also the development of the theological aspects of the translator’s role. This ensures greater ownership of the church in the theologising process of the church engaging with the Bible.

The final question (question 3) from the survey is, what milestones will we cross together in the Bible translation movement in the coming years?

## Key findings about milestones in the Bible translation movement

Will we actually ‘ever reach the milestone of having finished the work of Bible translation? There will be ongoing needs until the end of time’. Let us look at some of the changes affecting the Bible translation movement that help us consider upcoming milestones.

There are changes in role-players because ‘Bible translation [*is*] moving out of the realm of the “professionals” to the church and lay persons’. We are no longer the only participants in the process. There are ‘other players coming in’. Bible translation is:

'[O]penly accessible to all who want to participate ... without barriers. The foundational issues of quality assurance will not be addressed in the same way as they currently are. Bible translation will move from "expert centric" to ecclesiastical and user centric endeavours.' (PN10, 18 March 2019, GN)

'[To] the degree that the participants of the Bible translation movement are serious about including the church, we will see work started in the languages that do not have work in progress in this generation; however, this requires many more conversations in various circles and levels.' (PN2, 20 March 2019, GS)

'The church will not participate because we invited them. They will participate because they need Scriptures for evangelism and missions'. As the Global South church becomes 'more informed and involved ... we can expect to see an increase in the resourcing of Bible translation'.

There are changes in training where a milestone could be:

'[S]eeing a fully realized reconfiguration of training and missional orientation for those engaged in the Bible translation process – coupled with more holistic recognition of what it means to be actively engaged as a biblical translation consultant. [It is] the hopeful understanding that these efforts will grow and combine with similar efforts yet unknown to become a key pathway for a new generation of Bible translators and Bible translations.' (PN18, 26 March 2019, GN)

Changes in demographics are affecting the Bible translation movement. For example, in the Global North:

'[W]e are entering into an era where the Bible will not have the same value as it has today in the lives of people in the Global South as more people in these communities enter the middle class.' (PN7, 19 March 2019, GS)

As the Global North baby-boomer generation ages and literally dies off, the absence of 'their mindsets and influence of resourcing mission activity, including the Bible translation movement ... could be noticed by 2035 and even sooner'. The younger generations of the Global South and Global North will engage more and more in the Bible translation movement. However, it has been primarily:

'[C]onstructed' by the boomer mindset and thus there will be uncertainty as to transition. On the other hand, under God, a revelation of how God will "supply" His mission in this transition time (the late 2020's) could be anticipated as becoming a new foundation for interdependency among God's people.' (PN18, 26 March 2019, GN)

The Bible translation movement needs to:

'[T]ake stock of new realities that the local and global church are facing, [including] many churches and mission entities in different parts of the world are still serving from a 250-year-old paradigm.' (PN5, 18 March 2019, GS)

Changes in integration will become apparent when 'Bible translation organisations partner very closely with regional and local churches to give support to the churches' ministry and strategies'; 'Bible translation organisations' ministries and strategies are integrated with partner organisations, and

regional and local churches ministries and strategies'; and when 'Bible translation organisations' ministries – which are already integrated with regional and local churches ministries – come under the leadership and direction of the churches'.

There are changes in contexts and approaches. For example, 'Multilingualism is here to stay. How do we navigate to save smaller languages? Can transformation happen without Bible translation? If yes, then, what is our role?' 'The printed Bible is going to become less and less the centre of focus as people shift to digital and audio forms'. Bible translation is not a 'one shot event', but rather is (or should be/needs to be) 'an ongoing process of translation, publication, revision, etc ...':

'[A] recognition [*will arise*] that until Bible translation becomes a local activity in a language community that the work in that community is not "done". And therefore, that goal (of making Bible translation a locally owned and sustainable activity) should become a primary goal of any externally initiated and motivated Bible translation activity.' (PN12, 22 March 2019, GN)

## The milestone of finishing

Some in the Bible translation movement are predicting the milestone of seeing:

'[T]ranslation started in the last language where there is need for translation within one decade from now. Perhaps two to three decades from now, these last languages will have Scripture translated and accessible.' (PN16, 25 March 2019, GN)

Another hoped for milestone includes 'every person on earth [having] access to the full context of God's Word in the language that speaks to his/her heart in the next 25 years'.

Participants think:

'[A]nother milestone that may be reached is the realization that in spite of all the focus on counting down to zero, translation will never be finished. New languages will continue to emerge and existing translations will always need to be revised in order for the church to have relevant Scripture.' (PN20, 27 March 2019, GN)

'[W]e will likely never have a complete and final 'list of languages' (due to language change, dialects, diasporas, etc.) and thus there is no absolute "finish line" to the Bible translation task in this age.' (PN12, 22 March 2019, GN)

Therefore:

'Bible translation agencies need to rethink their future long before the translation needs come close to zero. [*One way is to*] identify the new roles of organizations and missionaries in communities that have completed both the Old and the New Testaments.' (PN22, 3 April 2019, GS)

Another participant thinks:

'The availability of Scripture in languages all the world can understand seems like a possible milestone in the next 15–20 years. It will take much longer for all the world's language communities to have Scripture in their local languages.' (PN20, 27 March 2019, GN)

Many Bible translation organisations have adopted 'Vision 2025'. This resolution was first adopted by SIL International and Wycliffe International in 1999. It reads (WBTI 1999):

Motivated by the pressing need for all peoples to have access to the Word of God in a language that speaks to their hearts, and reaffirming our historic values and our trust in God to accomplish the impossible, *we embrace the vision that by the year 2025 a Bible translation project will be in progress for every people group that needs it.*

We acknowledge that this cannot be accomplished simply by our working harder or doing more of what we are now doing. It will require us to make significant changes in our attitudes and ways of working.

Our desire is to build capacity for sustainable Bible translation programs and Scripture-use activities. Therefore, we urge each entity within our family of organisations to give priority to strengthening present partnerships, forming additional strategic partnerships, and working together to develop creative approaches appropriate to each context.

To this end we commit ourselves to pray for the fulfilment of this vision, seeking God's guidance and obeying Him in whatever new directions He may lead. (p. 5)

The best-known phrase from Vision 2025 is its quantifiable aim to have a Bible translation programme in progress for every language that needs it by the year 2025. When the vision was adopted in 1999, the number of languages needing Bible translation was about 3000 ( $\pm 10\%$ ). Currently, it is about 2100.

Some adopters of Vision 2025 have turned it into a practical goal with a view that Global North Christians will continue to play key roles in developing strategies associated with Vision 2025. This is logical because the vision was adopted at a time when the Global North influence in mission leadership and strategy was at its peak.

Balance is required, however, with dialogue from the Global South, so that their perspectives will have a continuing role in realising the vision, which takes place in contexts where 'the predominance of one culture over others is no longer accepted, and where cultural polycentrism is a fact of our time' (Balia & Kim 2010:255).

Almost as a caution to the current contexts, Brian Stanley notes how Latin American missiologist C. Rene Padilla, when addressing the Lausanne Congress of 1974 (Stanley 2018):

[C]riticized the strategists of the church growth movement for treating the task of world evangelization as a mere mathematical calculation of how to 'produce the greatest number of Christians at the least possible cost in the shortest possible time'. (p. 211)

The Bible translation movement is not the only part of God's mission interested in measuring progress. For example, Vaters (2019:n.p.) notes, 'We need a renewed, Christ-honouring, cooperative approach to kingdom growth that ignores no one, includes everyone, and utilizes the gifts of every church, no matter their size'.

Vaters (2019) also writes:

When I'm pushing for numerical growth, I preach, teach, disciple, manage and minister [*in*] an entirely different way ... In fact, I don't like myself when I'm in numerical growth mode. (n.p.)

He concludes (Vaters 2019):

Pushing for greater numbers at the cost of caring for people is too high a price to pay. Caring for people, even if it comes at the cost of numerical increase, is always the better choice. (n.p.)

These insights provide a sensitive reminder of how progress should be determined in the Bible translation movement.

Listed below are some final thoughts from survey participants, as they contemplated the future of the Bible translation movement:

- An expectation of more than 50% of translation specialists coming from the Global South.
- A measurable increase in financial contribution is looked for; for instance, by 2030 a full 50% of projects might not be funded by the traditional Global North funders.
- Within 2–3 years, new curriculum and approaches for training for Bible translation will have been tested and released across the globe.
- Envisioned in 3–4 years, the key Bible translation organisational structures will operate like movements that enable greater participation by the global church.
- In 5 years, church denominations will be the leaders of the Bible translation movement; Bible agencies will recognise this shift and will be happy to embrace this change.

In summary, determining what progress actually looks like in Bible translation has been broadened from the quantifiable implications of some interpretations of Vision 2025, to broader qualitative considerations that include greater ownership and participation of the global church in the Bible translation movement. This is more difficult to predict or measure, and yet provides the potential for greater sustainability.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this research has been to identify criteria for determining progress in the Bible translation movement embedded in the *missio Dei*. The analysis of progress was based upon a survey of three questions posed to leaders of the Bible translation movement: (1) How do we know what God considers to be progress in the Bible translation movement?, (2) What milestones are theologically significant for the Bible translation movement in the coming decades? and (3) What milestones will we cross together in the Bible translation movement in the coming years?

Through the analysis of survey responses, the multi-faceted nature of determining what progress looks like has been identified. Given the enormity of the Bible translation responsibility of the Bible agencies, churches and other participants, it is important to ensure that there are solid missiological foundations upon which this takes place.



There are many aspects that can be counted. While it may be right to factor the quantitative measure of people and organisations involved in the Bible translation movement, there is also the qualitative nature of how these players conduct their ministry; signs of increased collaboration between Bible translation agencies; and improved quality of relationships between Bible translation agencies and the local church.

Keeping an eye on the progress that is still needed leads one to wonder if Bible translation will actually ever be finished. The words of the Old Testament prophet Zechariah seem important: ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit”’ (Zch 4:6 NIV). These words to Zerubbabel were meant for encouragement. While the strength of the workers rebuilding the temple failed because the work was so strenuous (Neh 4:10), their efforts would succeed because of the help of God’s Spirit.

Through this research, a missiology of progress has emerged that considers: (1) an understanding of what progress could be in the Bible translation movement in the context of God’s mission has been broadened; (2) relevant milestones and how they could be theologically significant; (3) church history – what looks like progress in one era can actually be regress in another; (4) that reflecting and learning together within the Bible translation movement is a key to being faithful to God’s calling and (5) that all who participate in the Bible translation movement are called to do so together to serve God’s purposes – this is their privilege and joy.

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