

Effectiveness in mission – from an eternal perspective

“Wycliffe translators Bob and Barbara Campbell had persevered for nearly thirty years, living and working among the Jama Majee. Although progress was made in writing the previously unwritten language, literacy seemed impossible. The people would not repeat any phrase another person spoke because of their fear of spirits and curses. As the years turned to decades and the results were few people asked, ‘why not quit? Is this little group worth it?’”

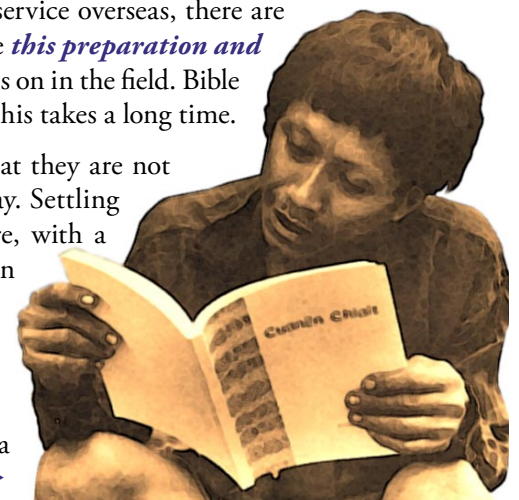
(taken from the Wycliffe film the *Power of the Word*)

We live in an accelerating world. Advertising and fast food restaurants promise us that we can have what we want immediately. We can magic a steaming cup of coffee from powder instantly; with super glue we can repair broken things in seconds. We can reach anyone anywhere by mobile telephone, and we can always be reached by them. For those of us that use the internet, we know that we can find any information we want – just one click of the mouse and it's there on the screen in front of us. Our modern world is results- and success-orientated. In the world of sport, success and results must be attained, and in the business world, a profit must be turned within the first year; if not then *our credibility, our talents and our ability* are in question. Maybe we have not even noticed that slowly our Christian mindset is being infected by this over-emphasis on results too. There is nothing wrong with setting goals for our ministry, knowing where we are going and what we want to achieve. The problem is when our expectations are too high.

In the light of the special ministry of Wycliffe Bible Translators, we do not tend to expect instant results. Despite this, from time to time we get comments like ‘your members have been on the mission field for some years, yet they still haven't really achieved anything to speak of. Is it really worth keeping them there? So far no-one has become a Christian and the translation seems to be hardly progressing. Is this really a good use of time?’ Let's examine how appropriate these opinions are. Are the governing principles that we use in our consumer society really relevant to overseas mission? What is real success and what are real results? It takes a long time for a Wycliffe missionary to become really productive. But what are our colleagues actually doing during this seemingly ‘wasted time’?

By the time that a Wycliffe member starts their overseas assignment, they already have several years of preparation behind them. By that time *they will have completed Bible college studies and linguistics training*. They will have also raised their financial *support*, and have gathered an *indispensable group of prayer supporters* to stand with them during their time overseas. Just think about how long it takes to organise a short holiday abroad! Before setting off for a time of service overseas, there are many *official things* that need to be sorted out. Although we give *this preparation and training time* less value, it is just as important as the work that goes on in the field. Bible translators do not appear overnight; they need to be trained, and this takes a long time.

When a member finally gets to the field, they soon realise that they are not going to be a useful member of the translation team straight away. Settling into a new culture which is so different from European culture, with a different climate, takes time. We also need to remember that in many countries the main religion is not Christianity, and the followers of Jesus are not always accepted with open arms even though they may not be treated as enemies either. After the initial time of settling in, the first step is usually the learning of a second foreign language. Why second and not first? By the time a Hungarian Wycliffe member has reached the field, they have ►



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► already had to learn at least *one world language*. After this comes *the second language*, which is usually the official national language or a trade language. (To give a Hungarian example – the Gardners spent their first years in Romania learning Romanian.)

From God's perspective, everything looks different. He doesn't measure success and results in the same way that we do.

Anyone who has had to learn a foreign language knows how difficult it is and how much time it takes. Language learning does not end here, because *a third language* still has to be learnt, which is usually the language of the people group the member will be working closely with – whether in

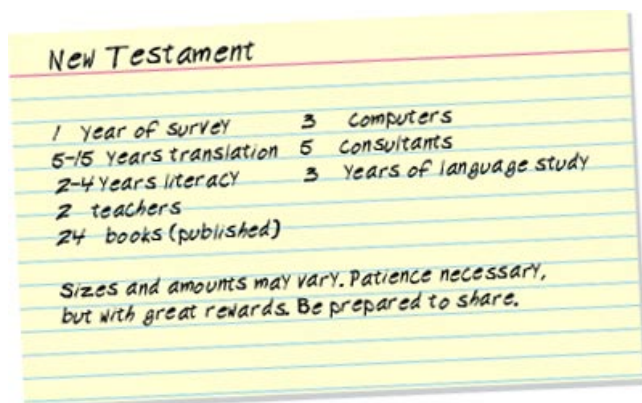
Bible Translation or literacy (in the Gardners' case this is the Roma language). The missionary also has to settle into this new environment and alongside language learning *they must get to know the cultural practices of the group*. Next *they must identify their future co-workers* who will help them in the translation or literacy work. They must also convince the particular people group of the necessity and advantages of the translation work. Only when all of this is in place can they begin the translation work.



Throughout this period of acclimatization and acceptance, the missionary needs to remain a credible and exemplary witness to Jesus Christ. This is of course not always as easy as it sounds when you are in an environment which is far less comfortable than what you are used to back home. Within most European people groups including the Hungarians, the gospel took a long time to pervade the whole cultural perspective, as they turned away from their pagan roots. It is therefore understandable that often it takes many years for the gospel to become grounded into a culture where the people are encountering it for the first time.

Our responsibility lies in the way in which we respond to our surroundings. Should we automatically assume that whenever something seems to be taking too long, after a while it should be natural to give up and to lose our enthusiasm for the goal? If we look at this from the world's perspective, then the answer is

probably yes! But from God's perspective everything looks different. He doesn't measure success and results in the same way that we do. Primarily he requires *obedience* from those who serve Him on the mission field. He wants them to go and fulfil their call in whichever situation He places them. From those of us who support our missionaries overseas He requires *faithfulness and perseverance*, and persistence in prayer for them, to continue to support them however long it takes.



The quote at the beginning of this article is a good illustration of the fact that many times Wycliffe ministry produces results only very slowly. Despite this, we should not question whether this work is worthwhile! There are

now several growing churches among the Jama Majee Indians, even though in the early days humanly-speaking this seemed impossible. After thirty years the Word of God started to break down their dark fears. Forty-two people were baptised in one day, and since then many have found freedom through the truths of Scripture. The God who knows the whole picture already knew this. The missionaries did not give up either, despite all the difficulties! The new Christians who have found salvation as a result of several decades of sacrificial ministry on the part of the translators are very grateful that the work continued. If we look from the perspective of their changed lives, and the gift of eternal life that they have received, then thirty years of struggle doesn't seem such a bad investment.

So what is success? We all know very well that in this world nothing lasts forever; sooner or later every man-made thing will perish, whether forms of government, trends or fashion. From the Bible we know, however, that God's Word will never pass away (Matt. 24:35). It is a great privilege for us that through our support we can be a part of passing on the only absolute truth to people who have so far never received it! Let's be steadfast and faithful, and try to look at the world from God's perspective!



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