

Translating the Bible Into Every Language

Bernie May talks about the vision of Wycliffe Bible Translators, a vision that has touched virtually every corner of the world.

Recently *Charisma* editor-at-large and editor of the *Buckingham Report*, Jamie Buckingham, flew with Bernie May, director of the U.S. Division of Wycliffe Bible Translators, to a remote mission outpost in Mexico.

May, who lives near Wycliffe headquarters in Huntington Beach, California, is a former pilot in South America who later served as executive director of the Jungle Aviation and Radio Service (JAARS). He still flies his own twin-engine Beechcraft. On this occasion Buckingham accompanied him on a missionary fact-finding trip to a small dirt strip near Caborca, in the desert region of Mexico.

One night, while the two men camped out under the desert stars, Buckingham conducted this exclusive interview with Bernie May.

Charisma: Bernie, Wycliffe has been translating the Bible into the languages of Bible-less tribes for more than 50 years. What are the challenges that still face you as you look into the future?

May: The challenge is the challenge we have had from the beginning—to finish the task. When William Cameron Townsend started Wycliffe 50 years ago, he thought there were 500 languages in the world that didn't have the Scriptures. Well, we hadn't gotten started very long

before he found there were at least 1,000. Then, within a few years, we began to get more information. We discovered at least 2,000 language groups without Scriptures. In recent years we've found out the task is greater than we ever imagined. We now know there are between 2,500 and 3,000 language groups in the world that don't have the Bible in their language. This represents over 3 million people. So, you can see we have an overwhelming task.

Charisma: Wycliffe has more than 5,000 members. Last year another 500 joined. What is your plan to finish the task?

May: I believe God is increasing interest in the hearts of people all over the world to get the Bible into all tongues. Wycliffe is simply a vehicle for Him to use. I don't know how it's all going to happen, but we are going to keep moving in the direction of God's open doors. If some nations close their doors to us—denying visas—God opens other doors. Recently that happened in a large Latin American nation where we had been working for a number of years. Almost overnight, believers in that country came to us, asking us to teach them how to translate the Bible so they could complete what we started. It's amazing what's happening out there. We don't control it. We're just here to facilitate God's plan.

Charisma: One of the criticisms is that Wycliffe is not a true missionary organization since you don't plant churches and evangelize people. You're accused of being linguists rather than missionaries.

May: God gave Mr. Townsend and our leaders a unique strategy. We focus on the science of descriptive linguistics. It is one of the most neglected sciences in the world today and we have trained our people to be linguists. They enter a tribe, reduce the language to writing through linguistic analysis, then translate the Bible. We are non-sectarian. Our job is to put God's Word in every language of the world. Yes, we go as linguists, and because of the linguistic contribution we are able to make, we are accepted in countries that may refuse admission to missionaries.

Charisma: At the same time, there is evangelism going on, isn't there?

May: You're right. We do not go into a community to evangelize. We go in to translate the Bible. The Holy Spirit then uses the Word and does a much better job of evangelizing than we could ever do.

A couple of years ago we encountered some heavy criticism by some Christians over this issue. I saw a report from one Latin American country where Wycliffe had been active for several years. At that time, we had translated the Bible into 60 languages in that nation. As a result of

our work more than 1,200 churches had been formed and thousands of Indians had come to know God and accepted Jesus Christ. The Bible and the Holy Spirit, working in combo, had transformed entire villages of wickedness and darkness into goodness and light. True, evangelism had not been done by our people. But the Holy Spirit, using the Bible we had translated, had filled the local people and *they* were the evangelists, pastors, teachers, prophets and apostles.

Charisma: Peru has been a tough country to work in because of the turmoil, but we keep hearing reports of revival.

May: I know of one language group where they now have churches in 130 different villages. They have a Bible school and, the last I heard, they had 75 students enrolled. This tribe, with more than 15,000 believers, is now sending out missionaries to other groups. They are now on their own and the third generation of Christians is even stronger than the first generation. They have young people, some of whom have gone on to the university and are now back in the jungle, leading the church and involved in local government.

Charisma: A lot of our readers are looking for places to serve God. Would a Charismatic be welcome in Wycliffe?

May: All kinds of people are members of Wycliffe: Lutherans, Presbyterians, fundamentalists. Recently the Assemblies of God named us as the agency to supervise their members who want to do Bible translation. We are non-denominational. As a result we don't focus on denominational issues. We do have a doctrinal statement for people who work with us. It is very basic, very historical and very strong in the Word of God.

Charisma: Wycliffe has grown rapidly over the last several years since you've become director of the U.S. Division. I know you don't take credit for that, but it has happened during your administration. What has been taking place?

May: I believe this is God's timing. This is God's day for the minorities of the world. The gospel is going forth in all the world in ways it never has before through television, radio and the printed word. At the same time, there are millions of forgotten people who have no way to be in touch with all that. They need to be reached. Now God has put it on the hearts of His people to reach these minorities for Christ. The result of this move of the Holy Spirit is a great, new surge of interest in Bible translation. For



Bernie May

example, 25 percent of all our missionaries have joined in the last five years. That represents more than 1,500 young people who have gone out. This year we will send out 500 more.

Charisma: Do they go straight to the mission field as soon as they volunteer?

May: The job we've been commissioned to do requires highly skilled people. They are computer experts, pilots, mechanics, nurses, teachers, administrators and secretaries. Some of these go to the field as soon as they raise their support and finish their basic orientation. But the task of translating the Bible takes intense training in linguistics. Most of our translators have the equivalent of a master's degree. Many have a Ph.D. It takes committed people who are willing not only to give their lives in service—but to prepare before going.

Charisma: If I was a 23-year-old college graduate who wanted to serve the

Lord in Bible translation, what process would I go through if I joined Wycliffe?

May: First of all, we have a four-week program we call Quest. It is designed to help people who are interested in finding God's will for their life in relationship to missions and Bible translation. We would start by inviting you to come to a *Quest* session. That would give you time to learn what Bible translation is all about—and to hear from God concerning your part in it.

Charisma: What does it cost?

May: It costs \$500. At the end of that program you can determine whether you want to pursue this as your life's goal or whatever God has for you. If you do want to be a Bible translator you would then go to our linguistic school. We hold linguistic schools in four places in the United States at different times. You would take at least two semesters of linguistics which would give you the basic

training for accomplishing the job. It is taught by our scholars and would be equivalent to graduate studies. You could either take your schooling in summer school at the University of Oklahoma, University of North Dakota, or the University of Washington. Or you could take it in Dallas at our year-round school. After two semesters, you would move on out to a field training group in Africa or South America or the Pacific Islands. We have a three month field orientation. It used to be called Jungle Camp but now we call it Field Orientation. You would go out and live with the people and learn cross cultural communications and maybe the local language. From there you would move out into working with a language in a tribal situation. Those who volunteer to be support personnel rather than linguists follow the same procedure but do not go through linguistic training.

Charisma: What percentage of Wycliffe personnel are actually linguists?

May: Well, it takes about two support persons—teams made up of pilots, mechanics, schoolteachers, radio technicians, typists, builders, etc.—to support one translation team.

Charisma: All those who make up a normal town are needed to make up a Wycliffe center.

May: That's right. We need local administrators, people to do purchasing and shipping, people who handle government relations with us in the local community. Since we are working mostly in the areas of the world which don't have the infrastructure to do this, we have to do it ourselves. That's one reason the job is so tough. It's awfully hard to get there, and it's awfully hard to stay and stay healthy. Everything we do is done by a team. We cannot exist by just sending in a translator. He or she must have a support system—not only to do their job efficiently, but to exist. We are presently working in 850 languages. We are entering a new language every nine days. My immediate goal is to see that accelerated so we are entering a new language every four days. That means we need workers of all kinds—both overseas and in our U.S. centers.

Charisma: It seems you are constantly under attack in various sectors of the world. Why would anyone want to stop the work of teaching people how to read the Bible?

May: I really don't know the answer to that. But I do know that when you are translating the Bible into a new language you stir up all kinds of powerful forces in the spirit world. These in turn work in and with those who do not love God in a powerful effort to stop what we are doing.

In other words, we are in a war. There are forces involved who want to kill us. But that does not discourage me—or our people. After all, greater is He Who is in us than he who is in the world.

Charisma: Each year it seems some anthropologist mounts some kind of intense attack against your work. They go to the press accusing you of disturbing these people in their pristine existence.

May: Just one visit into the jungle will reveal to anyone that these precious people know nothing of a "pristine" existence. They are diseased, starving, frightened, demon-possessed and lost. I can't understand how we who enjoy all the benefits of civilization, medicine, health, clear water, education and a relationship with God can sit by and let the rest of the world suffer.

I remember back in the early 1950s flying two translators into a jungle tribe for

the first time. They discovered the average life expectancy of those in the tribe was 27 years. Most of the women had lost more children in birth than had lived because of lack of simple hygiene. Today, 30 years later, the life expectancy of those same people is 58 years. The total tribal population in 1955 was 18,000 and decreasing. Today there are almost 30,000 in that same tribe. Babies live instead of die. The people no longer kill each other as before. They use tools to farm. They have medical clinics. They have a cooperative agricultural program. They have schools in 75 villages taught by Indian teachers. All that has happened because we came into their village, gave them an alphabet and taught them how to read and write.

Thirty years ago those people were terribly exploited by the white man. I have watched Indians working months to clear a field, cutting the trees sometimes with a stone ax so they could plant a few crops between the fallen trees. Then, when the crops would be almost ready to harvest, somebody from the outside would come in and say, "Oh, it's unfortunate but you planted on my land." The man would have a land title proving he owned the land the Indian had cleared and farmed. The Indian could do nothing but move back and start again. Then we came in and taught those people to read and write. When they learned to write their name, they could own their own land. For the first time in history, they have been able to legally defend themselves and integrate into the national life of their country.

The people in that tribe voted in the last national election for the first time. I just can't believe that there are people that would criticize that by saying we are destroying their "happiness."

Charisma: It's no wonder Marxists and Marxist sympathizers oppose what you are doing in a number of different areas of the world.

May: Those who oppose God know that His Word changes people for good. It sets them free and gives them a desire to see all men free. There is a revolution that goes on, and those who are interested in violent revolution or political revolution oppose what we are doing. They want reform by bloodshed, rather than through the blood of Jesus.

Charisma: Mexico, where we are tonight, is a nation in turmoil. There are forces here trying to force you out. This is true in a number of countries around the world.

May: God keeps turning these things

around for His glory. In Peru, for example, we were told we were going to have to leave. God, in a very miraculous way, turned the government around. Not only did the new officials invite us to stay, but top government officials actually came out to our jungle center to encourage us to stay.

Charisma: In 1981 terrorists kidnapped and killed one of your translators in Colombia. Has that had any significant impact on the work?

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May: Very much so. A martyrdom is the clearest statement you can make for what you believe. Chet Bitterman did that. Our people in Colombia—who did not run, but stayed, knowing they too might die, also made a clear statement about Jesus. The price on Chet's life was that we stop translating the Bible. When they killed him, it sent up a signal to the whole world.

The terrorists had accused Chet (and the rest of us as well) of working for the CIA. Others said he was in Colombia to smuggle guns or drugs. It was hard for terrorists to believe a man would enter the jungle just to help people. People don't do that, you know. Therefore, they reasoned and said he was an agent. However, the day after Chet died, his wife and our colleagues took his body and buried it there in Colombia. The whole nation knew then the truth. If he had been an agent or a smuggler his family or government would have flown his body back to the States. But Chet had committed himself to live, and if need be die, in Colombia. It was a powerful statement that he came to give his life for those he loved.

Charisma: Usually when terrorists strike, they come back and strike again. Has the M-19 taken additional action against WBT in Colombia?

May: The day after they shot Chet, the M-19 published a statement listing other Wycliffe members and some of our na-

tional helpers who were on their death list. They said they would keep killing until we left the country. But people all over the world began praying, and nothing happened. God turned the hand of the enemy. There were many threats. Other groups were attacked. But not only were they spared, we received tremendous support in Colombia by the people, the government and the press.

Chet's parents wanted to show the people of Colombia how they felt. There is a town in the interior that had a hospital, but no ambulance. Chet's home church got behind the project and helped raise enough money to purchase an ambulance in Chet's name. His parents took it down and presented it to the officials of the town. The president of Colombia received the Bittermans and the entire nation saluted them. Of special significance was that the town was a stronghold of the M-19 terrorists. The Bittermans knew that probably many of the M-19s would use the ambulance. I believe there will be a number of the M-19 people who will be in Glory because of Chet's witness in life and death.

Charisma: What is your biggest need? Money? People?

May: Our biggest need is a desire on the part of God's people to get the Word to everybody in their language. I pray that American Christians will realize how important it is to place God's Word in the hands of all men in their own language.

Somebody said to me not long ago, "Bernie, Wycliffe has a big job—getting the Bible translated into every language in the world." I listened, then thought: "That's not so. I don't accept that. It's not our job. It's the job of the Church. God has delegated His problem to the Church. Wycliffe is available to the Church to help them carry out God's commission and solve the problem."

Charisma: Do you see any end to this? Is it just going to go on forever?

May: Given the resources—prayer, people and money—we can finish the task in 50 years. We just finished in Bolivia. In fact, we are almost 90 percent complete in all Latin America and have a target date of 1990. On the other hand we're just getting started in parts of Indonesia, Africa and India. There are a lot of believers in Third World nations who have this same vision. Together we'll get the job done. ■

Editors note: For further information, please write to Wycliffe Bible Translators, Huntington Beach, CA 92647.