

Roots and Fruits

Retrieving Scotland's Missionary Story: a reflection on Ethiopia

Expectations

In 1975, my wife and I were going to Ethiopia to facilitate Ethiopian Christians (in the south of the country) translate the Bible into their language, through learning the language, training them, and working alongside them. The missionary organization which sent us (Wycliffe Bible Translators) had the same intention. For both, doing translation as much as facilitating it was in our thoughts. Without being over-confident, we thought that we had the basic resources to engage in this.

The congregation which sent us to this work assumed the same, and assumed that the mission rather than the congregation would be responsible for us and our work overseas.

However, interestingly, it proved difficult to get work and residence permits to work in Ethiopia, and we spent approximately four years in Kenya before successfully returning to Ethiopia. We were fully occupied in Bible translation activities in Kenya, and returned to spend the eighties in Ethiopia, but we later learned that our sending church had concluded during our years in Kenya that we had “mistaken the Lord’s call” and that this was the source of our difficulties!

In Kenya, I believe I was accepted as part of UBS, to whom I was seconded for various translation activities, including translation consulting. Since UBS is para-church, and cooperates with churches, I think I was received in the same way.

Back in Ethiopia during the 1980s, the churches with whom my translation responsibilities were associated generally saw my role as facilitating translation into the two languages where I was resident.

However, one of these churches was responsible for my work and residence permits, and I think that its officers did have difficulty adjusting to the idea that my facilitatory role was for all participating churches, which I therefore was responsible to treat as equal partners in translation.

After an unsuccessful move toward overseas mission, I had some resistance to trying a second time to get involved. I was also a promoted teacher of science in secondary school, enjoyed a developing career, and was then most reluctant to come out of teaching.

We did take the initial step, but with no thought of heading for Africa. An article by a mission leader fronted new work in Ethiopia in which the focus would be teaching Ethiopian Christians by being involved with them in Bible translation. This was attractive to me, and we ended up applying to be involved.

Then more difficulties! Ethiopia suffered a revolution, deposing Emperor Haile Selassie, and we arrived later that same year (1975) in the aftermath of a famine. The revolution was becoming more hard line, and hopes of getting work and residence permits faded, so that in mid 1976, we voluntarily transferred to Kenya.

In Kenya, as well as further academic training (University of Nairobi) we were gaining experience in a number of different aspects of translation work (with UBS).

Looking back, I believe that these checks were from the Lord, directing us through circumstances if not by ‘a word from the Lord’. It was also a time when we gained a lot of basic experience which prepared us for our role in Ethiopia during the 1980s.

The Reality

1975-76, in language learning (Amharic) in Ethiopia; 1976-80 is translation related activity in University of Nairobi and United Bible Societies; 1980-1989 leading & facilitating Bible translation

in the Hadiyya and Kambaata languages of south-central Ethiopia. In the eighties I also completed a PhD in linguistics at University of Edinburgh. My wife was thoroughly involved in translation during the eighties, and completed an MTh (Aberdeen) in the nineties.

From 1990-99 I developed BA and MA programmes for training African translators in two existing theological institutions in the Nairobi neighbourhood. We left these after ten years, believing we had done what we had gone to do, and returned to Scotland, perhaps to look for a different assignment. Again, my wife was involved teaching (Greek) during these years.

However, in 2000, I was invited to return to one of these institutions and develop a programme at doctoral level, which we did until 'retiring' in 2008. My wife continued to teach Greek, and completed a PhD (Edinburgh) in 2005.

In summary, first we had a lot of successful hands-on involvement in Bible translation, then a lot of involvement in developing full-time educational programmes at degree level—BA, MA, and PhD. I suppose about 100 African men and women received training in one of these programmes.

Looking back over 33 years, we are quietly gratified to have been able to live and work in remarkably engaging situations, doing work which caught our spirits and satisfied us. In human terms there are several 'marks of success', although we are conscious of how limited any person's success really is. At the outset we had the resources of the newborn—able to do very little, capacity for learning much.

Relationally, I have found it challenging, looking back. It was sometimes easier to accept and adjust to African Christian friends than to missionary colleagues, although not all of the former were easy, and not all of the latter were difficult! [world-views and skills were sometimes in competition].

Economically, in a faith mission, we had many years of tight financial struggle, only really coming out of it when our children became financially independent.

When we first arrived in Ethiopia, missionaries were leaving in substantial numbers because of the political situation. Bible translation had not been possible under Haile Selassie, but there was no longer a heavy restriction on it, and a small number of projects were starting up. Circumstances were stacked against all of us, and it was simply astonishing how much got done during the difficult eighties, by which time Ethiopia was overtly Communist, and engaged in a draining war in the north.

We sensed a crucial need to train our younger African colleagues for translation; after all, it was to train them we had gone to Ethiopia in the first place. The effort of developing sustainable degree programmes stretched our energy to the limit; I felt well-supported in the nineties by my area director, but we left very tired in 1999.

Meanwhile, our mission director was also increasingly in support of the training we were developing, and we began to see small changes in the "missionary-centred" focus of the organisation's involvement in translation. As a faith mission, its members each began their independent 'project', hoping to see it to completion, but sub-consciously often seemingly with themselves in central roles. We were all aware of the African church's lack of practical vision at the time for Bible translation, but I think most failed to see our approach as one which fostered the same. "If we keep doing what we're doing, we'll keep getting what we're getting."

Strangely, during the noughties decade, although we were invited back to NEGST to develop a PhD in translation, and although our missionary field leadership affirmed this, we have felt less sure of organisational moral support. Our leadership keeps putting funding into the programmes, but I wonder whether enthusiasm is at the same level. Or have priorities for mission change taken all available energy?

Looking back, I believe I developed a vision for training our younger African colleagues which was crucial for our mission, (but perhaps not clearly seen to be so). The adverse circumstances and the potential of some of our young translators were two contributing factors. I assumed that my missionary colleagues across Africa were committed in support, although there were fewer to train than we could handle.

I still see training as crucial, and if I feel any negative, it would be that faith missionary translators are so deeply concerned with 'translating the Word of God' that they do not keep strategic issues of the future firmly in focus. The future is only sustainable if the African Christian community is capable of sustaining it.

My 33 years in Africa have slowly, continually, changed my understanding of Scripture. I have learned so much from my African colleagues' and students' and translators' views of Scripture, and find myself constantly looking at it from their socio-cultural perspectives than from the western perspectives I grew up with.

I have enjoyed enormous fellowship with African friends and colleagues in UBS, NEGST, and church life.

The Outcome

As much as any human can say their Christian ministry has been successful, I believe I can say that our original purposes have been fulfilled. We went to Africa to facilitate Bible translation through training others. We have engaged with both translation and training throughout the years, and seen a fair number trained and engaged in that task. In the process we have had good hands-on involvement with translation, gaining valued experience.

More specifically, my vision for training Africans developed hugely, and could never have been possible from the outset in such a powerful and focused form. We could never have foreseen the ways it turned out!

I'd like to think he was deeply concerned with training his African people to handle Scripture in their first language, and that we were being squeezed and moulded to be instrumental (with others) in bringing this about.