THINGS MISSION AGENCIES SHOULDN'T SAY #1

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People can't grow as disciples if they can't read the Bible in their own languages - except they can!
Category: Observations

This is going to be a short series looking at some things that mission agencies say in their publicity and why they shouldn't say them. To avoid accusations of bias, let me start with something that you hear from my own agency and from others involved in Bible translation.

People need to have the Bible in their own language if they are to grow into mature Christians.

I've seen variations on this theme in agency publicity, missionary prayer letters and other sources, I've probably even said it myself in talks that I've given about Bible translation. It sounds perfectly sensible and it certainly makes a compelling case for the need for translation. The only problem is that it is not true, let me give three bits of evidence.

Most people are multilingual: to those of us in the Western world, it makes perfect sense that people need to have the Bible in their own language, because we tend not to speak other languages. However, most people around the world speak more than one language and just because they can't read the Bible in their mother tongue, it doesn't mean that they can't read it at all. Now, in almost all cases, people will understand a Bible in their own language better than they would one written in another language that they are familiar one. However, there are also cases where because of education or because of religious sensibilities, people will actually prefer to read a Bible in a language which isn't their own. There are a lot of complexities here.

History! For large parts of the history of the church, Christians in the East and West did not have access to the Bible in their own language and we would be very unwise to suggest that there were no growing disciples of Jesus for over 1,000 years. Widespread translation of the Bible into European languages only became a feature after the Reformation - that is for the last 25% of Christian history.

Mother Tongue Translators. I've had the privilege of knowing and working with many remarkable Christians who are translating the Bible into their own language. Their love for the Lord and their commitment to serving him in, often in very difficult conditions, has been inspiring. I've learned a huge amount from some of these remarkable believers. They had grown as Christians and in their desire to sacrificially serve God, despite not having the Bible in their own language - the clue is in the fact that they were the ones who were translating it!

There is a need for Bible translation, an overwhelming need. Though people may understand the Bible in other languages, they will almost certainly learn more in their own. Unbelievers are more

likely to access a Bible in their own language than in a foreign one. More importantly, our commitment to reaching people with the Bible in their own language is part of our following God in reaching out to people and meeting them where they are. In a very small way, the translation of the Bible reflects the Incarnation, as God stepped into our world, spoke our languages and lived our experiences.

We don't need to make big, somewhat dubious claims about the need for our work, there is already a pressing case to be made.