WORLD MISSION IN MINIATURE

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Last week, I attended a meeting organised by Wycliffe Bible Translators International. Leaders from organisations affiliated to Wycliffe International spent a week looking at some of the global issues which affect the work of Bible translation and Scripture engagement worldwide.

For me, the highlight of the week occurred in the very first hour that we were together. Kirk Franklin, the Executive Director of Wycliffe International laid out a timeline on one wall of the conference room, with the space divided out into decades.

At the appropriate time, as Kirk worked through the decades, each leader was asked to come out and to fix a sheet of paper with their organisation name against the decade when it was founded. So I went out and placed the Wycliffe Bible Translators UK sheet in the 1950s. By the end of the 1960s the picture was more or less what you would expect; there was Wycliffe US, Switzerland, Australia and a host of other Western nations with Wycliffe Offices.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but through the 1960s Wycliffe was basically a white, western organisation. However, into the 1970s this all began to change. Through the seventies and eighties a whole host of African and Asian Wycliffe Organisations started to spring up around the world such as Wycliffe Singapore, CABTAL in Cameroon and ANTBA in Burkina Faso. Then into the nineties as the effects of the fall of the Berlin wall began to take effect, many Eastern European Wycliffe's began to spring up in countries like Russia, Hungary and Slovakia.

Over the last ten years, the main growth in Wycliffe world has been in Latin America; there are many, many organisations in the Latin world that want to be a part of the worldwide Bible Translation organisation. However, what is really fascinating here, is that most of these groups are not joining Wycliffe International as formal members in the way in which Wycliffe UK, or Wycliffe Slovakia have done. Wycliffe now has a huge range of partner organisations with are more or less loose affiliation and these organisations come from all round the world.

There are a couple of important conclusions to draw from this. There is no way that Wycliffe International can be considered a white, western organisation these days. Our membership and leadership are truly international - and it is a wonderful world to work in.

The other thing to note is that Wycliffe is now much less of a formal organisation and much more an alliance or a network: a movement.

The reason that I mention this is that these are trends which you also see in the whole Christian mission movement. Wycliffe is just a reflection of what has been happening over the past fifty years in the Church as a whole. More and more people from all sorts of different countries are taking a lead in world mission. The Lausanne meeting in Cape Town later this month will be an amazing demonstration of this fact.Â But mission is also becoming more of a diffuse thing. Mission societies like our own are less in focus as looser networks and alliances - more flexible and able to respond to a changing world - take the leadership in many situations. Andrew Jones gave an excellent example

of the way that some people are impacting mission on his blog yesterday. His question about whether traditional missions can adapt to the changes happening today is an important one.

I believe that the way in which Wycliffe International has become a more open and inclusive organisation (and is working hard to become even more so) is a sign that there is a place for traditional missions with specific skills and background. However, as the world changes, so we need to change too.