BIBLE TRANSLATION CAN BE SCARY!

Posted on April 27, 2011 by Eddie

Category: Bible & Mission

Putting a Bible into someoneâ€™s hand can be a pretty scary thing to do. When you give someone a Bible, you donâ€™t just give them a way of reflecting on their own actions and motivations, you give them a way of looking at yours too! When I worked as part of a translation team, I would sometimes squirm as we worked through passages of Scripture, wondering what my African friends were thinking, knowing that I had not lived up to the standards that we were discussing in great detail.

Sometimes, missionaries are accused of forcing their views on the people they work with (and there may, sometimes, be truth in the accusation), but this certainly is not the case when we make the Bible available to a people group. When people can read and understand the Bible, they are able to discern for themselves what God requires of them and are freed from any cultural impositions from the outside. Archbishop Desmond Tutu says: â€œIf you want to keep people subjugated, the last thing you place in their hands is a Bible. Thereâ€™s nothing more radical, nothing more revolutionary,Â nothing more subversive against injustice and oppression than the Bible.â€

Far from destroying dignity and oppressing them, Bible translation and language development work helps to give people a new sense of their value before God and amongst the nations. Bilingual education programmes give people
a sense of value for their own languages and culture while providing them with a bridge to the wider world through the use of national and international languages. For many marginalised groups, who may well be ignored by their
national governments, a language and translation programme may represent the only hope for education and development in their area. The work of Wycliffe Bible Translators and its partner organisations isnâ€™t some sort of luxury; it is a vital part of bringing education, development and a sense of identity to some of the worldâ€™s poorest and most marginalised people.

It is hard for English speakers to understand what it is like to belong to a people group whose language is continually ignored or discriminated against, or to have a language so obscure that even God doesnâ€™t seem to speak it. I first began to grasp what it means to have a language written down and Scriptures available when I chatted to an old Kouya man who was beaming with pride as he held some of the first Scriptures published in his language: â€œNow,â€ he said, â€œwe areÂ just like the French, the Germans and the Americans; we have an alphabet and a Bible in our language, just like them.â€ Â The books he was holding were not ornate volumes in luxury bindings â€“ they were rather crude booklets produced on aÂ duplicator â€“ but to this old man they were worth their weight in gold because they showed that his language, his culture and he himself were important. Those simple booklets were a sign that God cared for the Kouya, that he had come to them and spoke their language.

This is my article in the current Words For Life, the Wycliffe Bible Translators magazine.