SHOULD WYCLIFFE BIBLE TRANSLATORS EXIST?

Posted on August 19, 2015 by Eddie

It is clear that some kingdom work cannot be done by a church, a family of churches, a denomination or stream, or an apostolic team on their own. In such cases, for example, the work of Bible translation, it is important that agencies like Wycliffe Bible Translators work alongside and serve the local churches.
Category: Mission

Given that stress and uncertainty are such a problem in these difficult times, let me reassure my friends and colleagues that the answer to this question is yes.

Right, having got that over, on with the post!

Yesterday, I pontificated that there are too many mission agencies and Justin Long weighed in with a considered response which is well worth a read. Today, I thought I'd move the debate on a little. To get really personal, if I'm suggesting that there are too many agencies, I have to face up to the possibility that the agency I work with is one of the "too many". It's only fair that I ask the question.

A couple of days ago, Lynn Green asked the same question about the organisation he works for, YWAM (it's worth reading this post, if you haven't done so). Broadly, I agree with Green's conclusions, though I disagree with some of the reasoning that leads him there. However, at the end he makes a leap of logic which I don't think you can legitimately make. Basically he says that since there is a place for mission agencies/societies/structures; then YWAM should exist. This is not true, the one does not imply the other (not that I'm saying that YWAM shouldn't exist). The general rule does not prove the specific case. Just because there is a place for mission agencies does not imply that each and every mission agency should continue as it is. Which brings me back to Wycliffe.

One obvious suggestion would be to say that Wycliffe should exist because there is still a vast need for Bible translation. However, this is an argument for translating the Bible, it isn't an argument for a particular organisation. The Bible Societies and other organisations such as New Tribes and Lutheran Bible Translators also translate the Bible. Wycliffe and its eco-system of related organisations bring a huge amount of expertise and experience to the work of translation and minority language development. They are world leaders in a number of fields, but that doesn't make them indispensable.

This brings me back to where I disagree with Lynn Green. He suggests that there have always been two equal strands in the church, the settled church structure and the missional structure. I think this is very hard to prove from the New Testament (which is why all mission scholars have to get to grips withÂ Early Christian Mission. To me, it is clear that the pattern in scripture and history is that the church is God's primary agent for mission and that other types of supporting structure exist in order to help the church fulfil her role. Over the last 200 years, we have inverted this relationship and have devised theologies to support our practice.

Wycliffe, or any other agency for that matter,Â should only exist as long as it is doing a good job of supporting the church in her mission. This, not the need for translation, nor the legitimacy of agencies in principle is the touchstone. Dave Devenish makes the case for Wycliffe's role in his bookÂ What on Earth is the Church For?: A Blueprint for the Future for Church-based Mission and Social Action:

> *It is clear that some kingdom work cannot be done by a church, a family of churches, a*

> *denomination or stream, or an apostolic team on their own. In such cases, for example, the work of Bible translation, it is important that agencies like Wycliffe Bible Translators* ***work alongside and serve the local churches****.*

Emphasis mine.

Wycliffe's commitment to work with local churches is captured in theirÂ Â philosophy of Bible translation:

> - *We seek to serve both the Church universal and the church as it exists within the Bible translation program context. It is expected that churches will play an important role in the decision-making, resourcing and quality-control processes of the Bible translation programs as early as possible.*
> - *While programs may begin with limited church roles, expanding that involvement needs to be a continuing priority until significant involvement is occurring. Moreover, because the reality of the Church in any given context is rather a segmented one, Bible translation should be developed as a strategic and non-threatening means for promoting the unity among relevant churches.*
> - *Whereas a local church may not be present in some contexts, the Church is universally present in all language communities through prayer and other intercessions. Working to support the development of a local church presence must always be part of the long-term considerations of a Bible translation program. In this regard, it will be important to build relationships with the Church at the national-level or beyond and to position Bible translation programs within those relationships. Thus, Bible translation could play a pioneering role to foster the outreach of the Church to new areas.*

On this basis, I have no hesitation about saying that Wycliffe should exist, though (as with anything) the proof is in the implementation, not in the policy documents.

Asking questions about the future and the role of an organisation is difficult and unsettling, but it is important if we are to discern how God is at work.

Disclaimer: I am no longer in a leadership role in Wycliffe and this blog post represents my own thoughts and should not be taken as representing the views of Wycliffe Bible Translators or it's staff.