

AFRICAN PARADIGM SHIFTS

**Bible Engagement and Discipleship
in Africa: Are we on the right track?**

**Questions and Ideas from 30 Years
of Work in Africa**

**ARTICLE 6 AFRICA TO
THE WORLD!**

**“THE AFRICAN IMPACT ON
GLOBAL CHRISTIANITY ISN’T
JUST A MATTER OF OPENING NEW
CHURCHES AND
RE-EVANGELIZING THE WEST.”**

– Matthew Elliott, PhD



AFRICA TO THE WORLD!

Some years ago, I sat in church as our pastor talked excitedly about his plan to support a new church plant in Liberia. To me, he seemed under the impression that Liberia had few churches.

At the time, I had just visited Liberia. Oasis was helping open the first Christian bookstore after a long, brutal civil war. The streets of the capital were still full of white trucks with the letters “U.N.” on the side.

In the areas I visited, there was no shortage of churches. But Liberia’s 80% unemployment rate meant there was also no shortage of well-meaning “church planters” desperate for anyone who could pay them in American dollars.

I wondered if my pastor had ever visited Liberia and if he knew what I knew about the country. Liberia needed help appropriate to its situation, help that went beyond planting an American church’s flag at “the ends of the earth.” My former pastor’s church-planting movement crumbled a few years later as his leadership was exposed as self-serving and disingenuous.

Church planting efforts can be a great blessing. But we can make wrong choices if we do not know the ground by visiting and spending time understanding the needs of the people we hope to serve.



In many parts of Africa, the most pressing need is for healthy churches that deepen the faith of believers. As many as 70% of Nairobi, Kenya’s residents attend church. However, many of these churches struggle to lead new Christians to maturity (just like many churches in my area, as well, I might add). In these places, might we not need more churches but better churches – churches that grow people deep in faith to meet their own local challenges with biblical solutions?

Africa is the one continent with a rapidly growing population. And Africa is the largest Christian continent, set to be 40% of Christians within 30–40 years. As Africa grows more educated, prosperous, and influential, Africans will be church leaders around the world.

Right now, 2 million immigrants from Africa live in the United States and as many as 5 million live in Europe. About 50% of African immigrants in the U.S. have a college degree. Some of Europe's largest congregations are African. African denominations have planted thousands of new churches across the globe, taking their commitment to prayer and evangelism with them. African mission agencies train and send missionaries into unreached areas of the world.

(See Oasis's amazing book, *I'd Rather Die on the High Ground*.)

The African impact on global Christianity isn't just a matter of opening new churches and re-evangelizing the West. Africans exert biblical and orthodox influence on some of the world's largest Christian denominations. The United Methodists, Lutherans, Anglican, and Catholic communities in Africa affirm orthodox theology and morality while standing strong against the Western drift toward theological liberalism. African church-plants from many Western denominations grew so fast that they came to vastly outnumber their fellow denomination members in Western countries.

Once, I spoke with the archbishop of one of the largest national chapters of a mega denomination in an African country, approaching 20 million members in his country.

When we first met, he scowled at me, and immediately questioned our books and theology. Were we Westerners here to pervert the true faith with modern ideas and morals?



Understandably, it took some time to find shared connections, friends, and theological interests before he warmed to our conversation. While few African leaders I've met with shared his demeanor, many have shared his skepticism of unbiblical ideas infiltrating the church from Western sources.

Africa's depth of discipleship and the strength of its biblical teaching will greatly affect the entire future of the global church. Africans will go out as missionaries, students, and businesspeople throughout the world. Today, African churches multiply as Western churches shrink. The majority of African Christians attend church regularly, while Western "Christians" are often cultural Christians who only attend church for holidays, weddings, and funerals.

The largest Bible translation partnership says their goal is to “eradicate Bible poverty.” Progress Bible (progress.bible) reports that of 2,207 identified languages in Africa, 282 have full Bibles, 444 have New Testaments, 390 have Bible selections, and 598 await translations. They estimate that 333 million people have only a New Testament, 110 million have only a Bible selection, and 16 million have no portion of the Bible.

First, let’s state the obvious from our analysis of Bible poverty in the reading languages of Africa: it is impossible to eradicate Bible poverty by translation alone. If a Christian lacks a copy of the Bible, that is still Bible poverty even if a translation exists.

In a decade-long dialogue with Bible translation leaders, I have yet to find someone who has the right data to correctly make decisions on how to meet Africa’s most pressing needs for Bibles. Western Christians have invested hundreds of millions of dollars to solve Bible poverty in Africa without knowing where to best apply the investment.

At Oasis we have a full survey designed to understand what Bibles Africans really need. Investing in this research would cost a small fraction of the money currently spent on translation. The information it would gather could make every dollar spent by translators more effective. A proposal developed by some of the most experienced researchers in the evangelical world has been included for your review.

(See the *Scriptrue, Spiritual Formation, and Language – An African Study* by Arbor Research Group® and Overseas Council Exploration Limited).



Although some of the data is unclear, what we do know gives us the following facts:

- In the vast majority of Africa, if you read, you will read in a major language that already has a Bible translation.
- The acceleration toward the use of languages of education is greatly increasing with mobile phones, media, and TV.
- Africans under 30 are much more likely to communicate in the languages of education.
- Older Africans are more likely to be illiterate and more likely to not be bilingual.
- The Bible will be the only or one of very few full books translated into African languages with small populations – so people will gravitate to reading in languages of education where books are available.
- Many and often most African speakers of languages without a Bible are bilingual.
- Very few African children receive schooling in an African language without a Bible.

Several conclusions flow from these facts. The best people to reach illiterate speakers of an African language are literate Christians from that same tribe. That was how Paul evangelized the Mediterranean. A Hebrew, fluent in Greek, proclaimed the gospel to the Greek-speaking world to bilingual populations.

Africans without a Bible in their African language aren't in Bible poverty if they can read the Bible in a different language. But people without Bibles who read in English or French are experiencing Bible poverty. Just like in Paul's time, literate Christians can read to believers who cannot read.



If illiteracy is most common among older Africans who are more likely to only speak one or two local African languages, Bible translation is mostly aimed at those who will probably never learn to read. We thank God for the great move into Bible literacy for oral cultures, and many people work to reach these communities with innovative solutions. But we must realize that in many places, reaching the next generation with Bibles does not involve Bible translation.

THREE KEY QUESTIONS

I have three key questions, given these facts:

1. Can we agree that Africa's bilingualism, reading languages, and generational differences require careful analysis before making decisions about when to create a full written translation of the Bible? This analysis should be fully transparent to donors. We are thankful that some of this analysis is happening already.

2. Can we agree that any person without a Bible is experiencing Bible poverty and work to rightly balance investments to meet this great need?

3. Can we agree that we need focused research on how to best alleviate Bible poverty one people group at a time?

CONCLUSION

For generations, as the church in Africa grew at incredible speed, its foremost need was to have the Bible and basic Christian resources translated into African languages, so that people could access the truth in their own language. As North Americans, we assume today's Africa still urgently needs our resources translated.

But the current reality raises new and difficult questions. What language do African children learn in? Do people prefer to read in their language of education? When a Bible translation is complete, will anyone read it in a decade, or in fifty years?

We also must return to the most important question—what is Bible poverty, and have we defined it correctly? From our best analysis, someone who cannot read or listen to the Bible in a language they understand lives in Bible poverty. Most Bible poverty in Africa happens in the languages of education. Much of the rest of Bible poverty is among older non-readers and can often be addressed through

ministry by local native speakers well-educated in a major language.

In this reality, Oasis cries out to the Christian community for balance. Balance in addressing Bible poverty requires focus on research before making decisions on project priority. Second, a balanced approach demands we aggressively address the Bible poverty that can be alleviated in English, French, and Portuguese right now. Third, an astounding 70% of Africa's population is under 30. This fact urgently demands that we emphasize the needs of youth for Bibles—Africans will be the dominant influence on the next generation of the church worldwide. (see our first article in this series)

Their need for Bibles is predominantly in English, French, and Portuguese. In the last few years, my favorite question to ask Africans has been, "Do your grandchildren speak to their grandparents in your mother tongue?" I have never received an unqualified "yes."