



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 3

ENDING BIBLE POVERTY
MIGHT NOT MEAN WHAT
YOU THINK...

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IF A TRANSLATION EXISTS.”

– Matthew Elliott, PhD



ENDING BIBLE POVERTY MIGHT NOT MEAN WHAT YOU THINK...

Is ending Bible poverty in today's Africa a matter of completing the needed Bible translation? No! The real issues of Bible poverty go far beyond simple answers.

The complexity starts with a dominant bilingual reality. There are about 1.5 billion people in Africa today. About 800 million of these live in countries where English is a dominant trade language, about 400 million live in countries where French is a dominant language, and about 70 million live in a country where Portuguese is a dominant trade language. That makes about 1.3 billion people. Our remaining 200 million live in North Africa where Arabic is a dominant trade language.

In our focus area outside North Africa, about 700 million people can read, according to WorldAtlas.com. However, the statistics around reading languages are exceedingly difficult to verify.

Most sources record "language group" and "literacy" but don't mention that most Africans read in their national language of education, not in tribal languages.

As you might guess, these national languages of education, with a few exceptions (accounted for in our statistics) are English, French, and Portuguese. At least 500 million Africans can read these languages.



The 200 million remaining readers live mostly in a few countries or isolated areas that teach reading in both these trade languages and a language like Swahili or Amharic. Therefore, the vast majority of readers learn in at least one Western language with an existing Bible translation.

Let me share two verified data points to back this up. First, the world's #1 Bible app records that over 98% of reading hours in Africa are in English, French, or Portuguese. Basically, if you have a cell phone, you research and read in your national language of education.

Second, Oasis undertook what may be the most comprehensive Bible reading survey in Africa. We found that in North Nigeria, where Hausa dominates as a language of the market and has a Bible translation, 93% of Christians prefer to read their Bible in English.

Sometimes when I am with an African age 35 or under, I ask, "What is your 'mother tongue?'" Often, they say, "Hmmm.... Let me think.... Maybe English, maybe Swahili, but for reading, definitely English." In summary, if you read and live below the Sahara Desert—and many millions above as well—then you, along with the vast majority, will most likely read in your language of education, not your traditional African language. And your language of education is almost certainly either English, French, or Portuguese. These facts mean translation isn't the issue for most Africans living in Bible poverty.

Here is the problem that most of us do not understand. We estimate that about 15 million full Bibles are being distributed in Africa every year, along with many more millions of small, hard-to-read pocket New Testaments. However, most of these are value Bibles that quickly fall apart, especially in hot, wet, tropical environments. It is generous to say the average Bible in Africa lasts 10 years. This means that Africa has about one Bible for every five readers, and one Bible for every four Christians.

That is the greatest Bible poverty in history for literate Christians, and not because Africans don't have the Bible in the language they need to read. This problem can be solved right now with the right strategy and resources.

See the article in this series on why business is the answer to ending Bible poverty in Africa (African Paradigm Shifts - Article 4).



Even more tragically, up to 75 million of these literate African Christians without a Bible are youth currently in a Bible class, Bible club, or Bible study.

Can digital Bibles be a solution? Part of the solution for sure, but it's not as easy as you think.

See the article in this series on digital and printed Bibles (African Paradigm Shifts - Article 5).

The other side of Bible poverty is people who have an African language without a translation of the Bible. I will start by saying that at Oasis, we LOVE Bible translation! We just want the church to also consider a strategic, research-based, and balanced approach to giving all believers access to the Bible.

A common phrase among Bible translation organizations 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 see 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.

(A proposal developed by some of the most experienced researchers in the evangelical world is in the works. Reach out to us to receive a review copy.)



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 years old are much more likely to communicate in the languages of education.
- Older Africans are more likely to be illiterate and likely to 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 African speakers of languages without a Bible are bilingual.
- Very few African children receive schooling in an African language without a Bible.
- Most Africans own a mobile phone and have access to a mobile phone network. However, fewer than half own a mobile phone with Internet access, and even fewer have access to a computer.

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 written translation of the Bible? This analysis should be fully transparent to donors. Thankfully, 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)

Africa's 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."