

Editorial: Reaching the Non-Literate Peoples of the World

These are very exciting days as we see our Lord building His Church and drawing to Himself people from every people, tribe, tongue and nation. Yet despite great progress, there are still formidable barriers that need to be overcome. Among these are the literacy (illiteracy) and language barriers. Not only do we need to be aware of these barriers, but also to take note of the tools that God has put into our hands to penetrate them.

Thanks to the tireless work done by Bible translators, nearly 2,000 language groups now have either a Scripture portion, a New Testament or the complete Bible in their language. These are vital “tools” if the church in the various people groups is to mature and become viable. However, research shows that slightly about half of the world’s adult population is non-literate. Statistics compiled in 1992 by David Barrett (Editor of the *World Christian Encyclopedia*) place the count of non-literates worldwide at very close to two billion. In spite of the many on-going efforts by governments and agencies to teach literacy, this figure could rise to 2.4 billion by AD 2000.

The United Nations entitled the 1980s “The Lost Decade” because illiteracy increased significantly during that period. Contributing factors for this increase are:

* The 35 poorest nations of the world decreased their education budget by 25%.

* In Zaire (even before the civil war) 20% of the teachers were fired.

* In Ghana, (official report of 36% literacy), many unqualified teachers teach for only one or two hours a day.

* In Benin schools have been closed for several years because a corrupt government has misappropriated monies designated for education.

We need to consider the fact that

multitudes of non-readers are usually the least reached with the Gospel. It’s becoming increasingly obvious that the only way they will be reached is through some form of Gospel audio-communication strategy. Like the Blackfoot Indians of North America, who prefer audio-Scriptures, and have little or no interest in learning to read, including their own language. In some cultures this changes, but usually only after they become Christian. However, even at that, examples abound where Scripture translations have been completed for 10 or 15 years, yet today only one or two percent of the people can read them, and even less actually read them on a regular basis. As a result, many Bible translators have considered supplementing their written translations by putting Scriptures on cassettes.

Organizations such as Gospel Recordings, United Bible Societies, Hosanna Ministries and Audio Scripture International have taken the lead, and for some years now have put Gospel messages on tape to communicate God’s Word to thousands of non-literate people. Even so, millions still have not had the opportunity of hearing the Gospel in a language they speak and can understand. Currently thousands of tribes and unreached people groups have no real access *nor opportunity* to hear the message of God’s love in a way that can touch them. They truly are without the Word of God, and do not have the ability to call on the Lord and be saved.

The goal of Christian mission efforts in general, and frontier missions in particular, must be to give every language group in the world the message of the Gospel in a simple yet culturally relevant way. The recorded messages must clearly explain the way of salvation centered in Christ and His perfect finished work, as well as lay the basis of

a proper understanding of salvation. All the non-literate unreached peoples of the world must be reached with the message of Christ!

This special edition of the Journal focuses on that awesome challenge. What will it take for the Gospel to be available to all the peoples of the earth—including the thousands of non-reading peoples? Certainly it will take prayer and intercession, coupled with a new perspective of the task at hand and new ways to communicate the Word. It will also require renewed and greater commitment on our part, top notch research, use of the best tools to pull it off—with adequate finances to support the whole effort!

As you read, we trust you will be challenged anew by each article and every author as they focus on a particular aspect or complexity of the task—basic Gospel communication to lost people clustered in ethnolinguistic groups who *cannot read*. They are lost because the Gospel still hasn’t been brought to them *in their own languages*, nor has it seriously been presented to them *in terms of their own cultural situations and values*. We must see it for what it is: The burden of responsibility (and often the lack of fruit) lies with us, the communicators of the Word! May we see and learn so that for God’s glory the two billion plus non-literate people of the world, clustered in thousands of people groups, may clearly hear the Good News. May it be soon, even by AD 2000!

*Dr. Hans M. Weerstra, editor IJFM, and Ross Lange, of Gospel Recordings. June 1995
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