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s. 3 Kristin Norseth
Leder

s. 5 Bill Mitchell
**The Bible and Church Growth: Globally
and Locally**

s. 22 Eric J Trozzo
**The Pastoral Luther as Guide for
"Experience-Near" Theology: Reflections
from Sabah, Malaysia**

s. 39 Else-Britt Nilsen
**Norges Kristne Råd – et fellesskap av
kristne kirker og trossamfunn i Norge**

s. 48 Jostein Lorås
**«Som faar uden hyrde». Norsk
Finnemisjon i et sørsamisk område
primo 1900-tallet.**

s. 61 Bokmeldinger



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The Bible and Church Growth: Globally and Locally

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Dr Bill Mitchell is a Scot who has spent some forty years in Latin America, as a missionary, Bible translator, and translation consultant of the United Bible Societies. Now retired, he continues some involvement in translator training and providing consultant help in the Andean countries. He is also researching the life and ministry of James (Diego) Thomson, a Bible Society pioneer in the first half of the 19th century.

Abstract

The Bible and mission have been linked in a symbiotic relationship since the beginnings of the church in the first century. This paper draws on examples of this relationship from different periods in Church history to illustrate a variety of initiatives and their role in the life and growth of the church. The Roman Catholic Verbum Domini document and the Lausanne Movement Cape Town Covenant illustrate contemporary approaches, while examples of Scripture engagement programmes in Latin America and the UK speak to the creative use of the Bible in mission today. As with the church in all ages, challenges remain--some of which are touched on in the appendix.

*“The Gospel must be constantly forwarded to a new address,
because the recipient is repeatedly changing place of residence.”*

(Helmut Thielicke)

It has been a great privilege for me to have been involved in Bible translation and the life of the church in Latin America for forty years. This experience has allowed me to see and be encouraged to reflect on the role of the Word of God in societies and cultures, in terms of the reception history or ‘effective history’ of the Scriptures in those contexts. It has, in turn, led me back to the Early Church context.

1. The Early Church

In the New Testament it is clear that the role of the Scriptures in the emerging church was fundamental. Luke begins his gospel with these words:

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, *so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.* (1.1-4)

Almost at the end of his gospel, Luke relates the encounter of two disconsolate disciples with the risen Jesus and tells how “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the Scriptures” (24.27). Jesus’ own discussions with leaders often centered around the Scriptures: “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf” (Jn 5.39). “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (Jn 5:46).

John himself gives his reasons for writing and structuring his Gospel as he did:

Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that *you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, -the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.* (20.30,31)

In other words, John selected his material for what we might call today an evangelistic purpose.

To his young colleague Timothy the Apostle Paul gave this advice: “Until I arrive, give attention to the *public reading of Scripture*, -to exhorting, to teaching”. (1 Tim 4 13). In reminding him of his earlier life, he says: “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures that are *able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*” (2 Tim 3.14-15). He then goes on to speak of the inspiration of the Scriptures and the role that they have in the life and wellbeing of the Christian community.

We are, of course, at this point talking about the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. Yet at the same time we find that as Paul's own letters circulate, they come to be given a status alongside those Scriptures: "So also our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, speaking of this as he does in all his letters. There are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, *as they do the other Scriptures.*" (2 Pe 3.15,16).

This is not the place to explore the development of the New Testament canon, but we should note the role of texts in early Christianity. From a very early point the reading of texts was a typical part of corporate worship gatherings. This was uncommon in the Roman-era setting for a religious group, its only analogy being the use of texts in synagogue gatherings. In examining this, Hurtado speaks of early Christianity as a 'bookish' religion,¹ and points out that the number of new texts produced by the Christian communities was remarkable and unusual. He calculates that there were "at least some 200+ texts that we know of composed by around 250 C.E."² -- a significant number for a total Christian population estimated to be around 200,000 by 200 C.E..

The use of texts, in worship, teaching, and the formation and growth of the Christian community became an important distinguishing feature of the new faith. Within sixty years of Jesus' death and resurrection the texts that we have come to know as the New Testament were all in existence. Within those texts we find evidence of sharing them between communities, as already noted from 2 Peter. Paul himself also points to this: "When this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea." (Col 4.16). Colossae and Laodicea were a mere 15 kms apart, but the reference points to a wider practice.

Those young churches were not "a scattering of relatively isolated, introverted communities, but a network of communities in constant, close communication with each other."³ Writing materials were not cheap, yet they devoted considerable resources to copying and disseminating their texts over a wide area. Texts were usually hand-delivered to the designated recipients, so, for instance, Phoebe, leader of the church in Cenchreae, and Paul's patron, probably delivered the letter to the Romans (Ro 16.1,2), while Onesimus probably carried both the letters to the church in Colossae and Philemon. This sending and sharing reflected and furthered the sense of these communities being connected with other circles in a larger, trans-local fellowship. By the mid-second century, both the Gospels and Paul's letters as we know them from the New Testament were in circulation.

From Paul's earliest letters, the aim was to address the new believers' concerns and needs in the situations where they were, so as to 'grow' the church in its faith, and to grow the church numerically as Christians lived out and shared their faith--"holding firm/out the word of life" (Phil 2.16). The story they told and of which they had become a part, found its written expression in a new 'Christian' genre--the 'Gospel'. The Gospel writers used Scriptural echoes to re-narrate Israel's story to show their contemporaries that Jesus was both Israel's Messiah and Israel's God, and to equip their own communities for mission in their pagan environment. The Scriptures and church growth went hand-in-hand from the earliest stages of the Christian faith.

2. The growing church – a fourth century example

The Book of Acts charts the growth of the church towards the west, but from Antioch the church also spread to the east along the Silk Road and elsewhere. Edessa became an important centre of Christianity in the second century, and the earliest manuscripts of the Syriac Bible date from the same period. One of the earliest translations was Tatian's *Diatessaron*, the gospel harmony from around the year 170. The Syriac Bible itself became a 'missionary', with Syriac Christians taking the Good News as far as India and China 1500 years ago—reaching out 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1.8).

Working in Edessa in the second half of the fourth century, the Syriac 'church father' Ephrem (ca. 306-373) was a key figure. At a time when the church was threatened by heretics within and invading armies from the outside, Ephrem's multi-faceted use of the Scriptures in the liturgy and life of the church contributed to its strength, stability and growth.⁴

Ephrem left a legacy of commentaries on Biblical books, often reflecting Jewish exegetical traditions and theological concerns, yet also engaging with the issues of the day, arising both from contemporary philosophy and heretical movements.

Poetry is a prominent feature of Syriac literature, and it plays an important role in Ephrem's preaching and exposition of the Bible. He interacts with three 'harps'—Old Testament (Harp of Moses), New Testament (Harp of Jesus), and Nature — reading these with the 'eye of faith'. In contrast to his commentaries, this was a symbolic or typological reading of the text, where the symbol and the reality were intimately related.⁵ Ephrem ranges over the Biblical text as if it were some kind of Patristic hypertext, an intricate web or network of interrelationships where intertextuality characterises his approach to meaning.

His preaching found expression in poetic form:

- a. His verse homilies presented biblical episodes in the form of a dramatic retelling which drew out the potential of speeches by biblical characters through 'reading between the lines' and exploring the silences of the biblical text.
- b. In his dialogue poems biblical characters highlight decisive moments in the biblical narrative.⁶ Two characters exchange short stanzas in an animated discussion, in which one character 'wins'. In this way he pinpointed moments of dramatic tension in the biblical narrative, and explored the psychological tensions of the characters to bring out theological meaning—something akin to a 4th century 'rap'.

Ephrem's poetry comes to its highest expression in his hymns, which explore a rich symbolic world to express images of the divine drama found in Scripture, but which are recreated by the poet for reenactment in the liturgy. "His pedagogical strategy in his hymns was to create a reciprocal hermeneutic between the stories of scripture and of his own context."⁷ They were brought to life as it were in a dramatic performance, set to Syriac folk tunes, and sung not only in church, but by all-female choirs in the forum of Edessa. "Ephrem wrote for a liturgical audience. His congregation, in singing his poetry, would have participated in his exegesis and received a re-scripted narrative identity thereby."⁸

In the context of a church facing dangers from outside and from within, Ephrem's wide-ranging use of the Scriptures, engaging with the Word and with culture, and involving the congregation, enabled Christians to enter into their story, and to know who they were as the people of God. Brock rightly comments that "these may be seen as excellent vehicles for popular catechetical instruction which deserve to be revived today".⁹ They anticipate 'Performance Criticism' of our own day,¹⁰ and provide models for approaches to orality recommended in the Lausanne 2010 Cape Town document (see below).

3. The Bible in the Christianization of Peru in the 16th. century: Luis Jerónimo de Oré

While the Christianization of Peru in the 16th. and 17th. centuries took place in the midst of violence, brutality and oppression, it is now possible to see other elements more clearly against this background. For the Church the Creeds played a key role in the process of Christianization. They provided the basis of catechesis,¹¹ which took place in a liturgical setting and through schools, sacred songs, the sacraments, sermons and the Holy Scriptures.

With regard to the Scriptures, their role in the formation and devotion of missionaries should be mentioned, especially the missionary orders. Seibold speaks of ...the centrality of the Word of God in Spain's 'Golden Age', a role which was not affected by the restrictions on Holy Scripture in that period. This free use of the Word of God in the writings of the [Spanish] 'espirituales' of the 16th. and 17th. centuries spilled over to the Indies and to the great venture that would take place there as a result of the evangelization of that New World.¹²

The first missionaries were impacted by the reform that took place in the Spanish church at the beginning of the 16th. century under Cardenal Ximénez de Cisneros. In founding the University of Alcalá in 1508, he aimed to reform the Church by a return to the sources of the faith—the Word of God in the original languages, Hebrew and Greek.¹³

While neither the complete Old Testament or New Testament was translated into Peru's major languages, the polyglot Franciscan priest Luis Jerónimo de Oré was one of those who translated the lectionary passages of the "Gospels and Epistles for Sundays and Feast Days" into Quechua and Aymara.¹⁴ In addition, Oré translated large passages of the Biblical narrative into Quechua, put them into verse to Andean tunes, and introduced them by children's choirs.¹⁵ He found that poetry and song had a greater effect on his congregations than the ordinary "bread and butter" of sermons.

The church grew, yet it was in a context of conquest and under a colonial umbrella, but nevertheless the Word took root, even providing the language of protest against oppression. The 16th. century Andean historian Guaman Poma de Ayala gives voice to this:

Everyone, shout out! Especially you, indigenous men and women! Cry out with the prophets, just as one of them did: 'Lord, how long will I cry out and you do not hear? Lord, how long will I shout and you do not reply?' Cry out with them, weep, groan in agony with all you have, let your tears flow freely with the prophets for God to help you. Let everyone reply: 'Amen, Jesus.'

And you, brothers and sisters, Indians like me, let me hear you say: 'Amen, Jesus.'¹⁶

This cry for justice echoes the words of Habakkuk and is part of the biblical legacy in the Andean collective memory. The Andean appropriation of the Biblical message became a subversive factor in the face of the emerging colonial structures.

How did this coming together of colonialism, the Bible and church growth develop? In 2005 in a symposium held in Colombia to mark the 40th anniversary of the Vatican II *Dei Verbum* document, Fr. Gabriel Naranjo gave a historical overview of the role of the Bible in the Church's pastoral ministry in Latin America since the 16th century. He spoke of "four decades of sowing, four centuries of hibernation, and four decades of germination",¹⁷ he saw the long 400-year 'winter' as the result of replacing the Bible by the catechism.

In each of these cases — early Church, Syriac Church, Peruvian Church — the Scriptures were central to the life, survival and growth of the church, but each interacting with the context and with different results. The Word of God does not operate in a vacuum, but in specific settings and interfaces with diverse cultural and religious traditions, sharing in the ambivalence and ambiguity of appropriation in those situations. Nevertheless the influence the text has had in lives in different epochs and circumstances marks the course of history¹⁸ — I have tried to illustrate this elsewhere with reference to Quechua Bibles in southern Peru in contexts of major land reforms and terrorist warfare.¹⁹

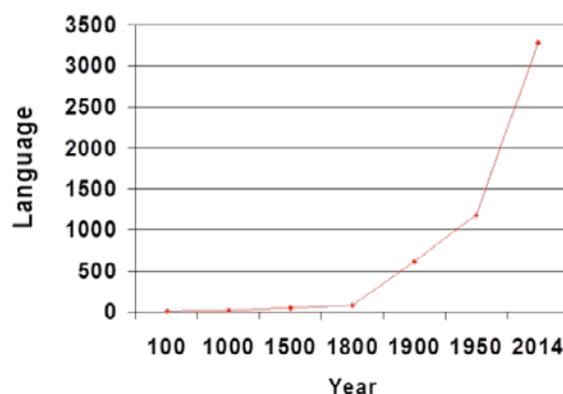
4. Growth in Bible translation

While the Franciscans and other religious orders were at work in Latin America, the Protestant Reformation was well underway in Europe, with translations being carried out in major European languages. However the real growth in Bible translation began in the late 18th century. In 1792 the self-taught, English shoemaker William Carey from Northampton launched his pamphlet on the need for Christian mission—*An Enquiry on the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. He himself headed for India. There he dedicated himself to Bible translation as the means to sharing the good news. Bible, mission, and translation went and-in-hand.

Languages with Scriptures – December 2014

The above graph attempts to chart the growth of Bible translation. There was slow advance in the first 1500 years of our era, and then significant growth with Spanish and Portuguese colonial expansion (usually the translation of texts for the liturgy and lectionary readings) and the Protestant Reformation. However, as can be seen, the Reformation did not result in the expansion in translation that is often attributed to it.

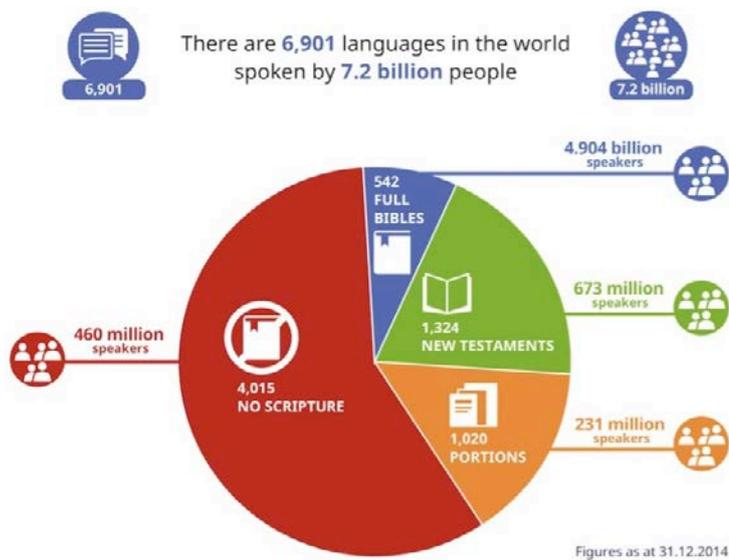
The graph shows that the major development in Bible translation took place after 1800, coinciding with the development of the Bible Society movement and the modern missionary movement. Much later, in the aftermath of the second world war, there was a surge in the evangelical missionary movement, especially from North America,²⁰ as well as a new missionary thrust on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. In the Americas a significant number of these new



missionaries focused attention on indigenous peoples. This may explain the rise in translations from 1950 onwards.

Current situation²¹

In terms of population, at least a portion of Scripture exists in languages spoken by 94% of the world's population. Around 460 million people, or 4000 languages, still have no Scripture in their language. At the same time we must remember that the existence of Scripture in a language does not mean that the 94% have actually received, heard or read Scripture in their own language. In addition, over 2 billion people in the world today are illiterate, one third of the world's population.



Nevertheless as we look back we recognise that Bible translation has played a key role in the life of the church since its very beginnings. The translatability of the Scriptures is basic to the Christian faith. This has resulted in the church successively (and successfully) crossing cultural boundaries and emerging and expanding in new contexts with fresh vitality and appropriate forms. In these contexts a variety of media have been pressed into use—the oral medium, the codex, the illuminated manuscript, the printed book—and now the new media.²² Lamin Sanneh suggests that the fact of Christianity being a *translated and translating* faith places God at the center of the universe of cultures.²³ In today's changed and changing situation strategic directions for the shape, nature and priorities of Bible translation are being determined.

5. Bible in Mission – some global perspectives

Of the recent documents on mission that have emerged, e.g. Edinburgh 2010: *Mission Today and Tomorrow*, WCC *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes*, the examples taken here are from the Roman Catholic Church and the Lausanne Movement.

a. Roman Catholic Church

The Fifth Conference²⁴ of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopate of the Roman Catholic Church was held in Aparecida, Brazil in May 2007. The bishops were aware of the massive changes in Latin America since their previous conference in 1992, among them the impact of globalization, the huge inequalities between the rich and the poor, the threat of ecological devastation, the swelling numbers of urban poor and the burgeoning youth population. The conference theme was “*Missionary disciples of Jesus Christ so that our peoples may have life in Him.*”

In his Inaugural Address Benedict XVI struck a note that would echo through the conference and beyond:

“As the missionary Church prepares here in Aparecida to begin a new stage in its life, a deep, experiential knowledge of the Word of God is essential...”

We must build our missionary commitment, and indeed our whole lives, on the rock of the Word of God.”²⁵

The Conference affirmed that the Word of God is the “source of life for the Church and soul of its evangelizing action.”²⁶ It leads to encounter with Jesus Christ, authentic conversion, renewed communion and solidarity. From this comes a proclamation of Jesus to all through an “inculturated evangelization”. The approach to the Word recommended to the people of God is the *lectio divina*. The practice of prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture leads us “to meet Jesus, the Master; to understand the mystery of Jesus, the Messiah; to commune with Jesus, the Son of God; and to bear witness to Jesus, the Lord of the Universe.”²⁷ The Bible was thus placed at the heart of what it meant to be “missionary disciples of Jesus Christ”.

The Aparecida final conclusions²⁸ contributed to the thinking of the Synod of Bishops on ‘The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church’ held in Rome in October 2008, which in turn presented its “55 Propositions” to Benedict XVI, which formed the basis of his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*:

“The Synod called for a particular pastoral commitment to emphasizing the centrality of the word of God in the Church’s life, and recommended a greater “biblical apostolate”, not alongside other forms of pastoral work, but as “a means of letting the Bible inspire all pastoral work”²⁹... making the Bible the inspiration of every ordinary and extraordinary pastoral outreach will lead to a greater awareness of the person of Christ, who reveals the Father and is the fullness of divine revelation.”³⁰

Benedict reaffirms that “the privileged place for the prayerful reading of sacred Scripture is the liturgy, and particularly the Eucharist, in which, as we celebrate the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament, the word itself is present and at work in our midst.” He also affirms that the word of God is at the basis of all authentic Christian spirituality, and recommends the wider use of Sacred Scripture, insisting on “the need for a prayerful approach to the sacred text as a fundamental element in the spiritual life of every believer, in the various ministries and states in life”. He focuses on the *lectio divina*, which is truly “capable of opening up to the faithful the treasures of God’s word, but also of bringing about an encounter with Christ, the living word of God”.³¹

Verbum Domini significantly highlights the importance of Bible translation in the mission of the church:

The inculturation of God’s word is an integral part of the Church’s mission in the world, and a decisive moment in this process is the diffusion of the Bible through the precious work of translation into different languages.... How many people today hunger and thirst for the word of God, yet remain deprived of the “widely available access to Sacred Scripture ” desired by the Second Vatican Council! I would encourage the investment of resources in this area. In particular I wish to recommend supporting the work of the Catholic Biblical Federation, with the aim of further increasing the number of translations of sacred Scripture and their wide diffusion. Given the very nature of such an enterprise, it should be carried out as much as possible in cooperation with the different Bible Societies.³²

In making the Bible the transversal of all pastoral work, in the stress on the importance of *lectio divina* in the lives of the faithful, in providing for ongoing translation of the Scriptures, there are developments which are both worthy of the Second Vatican Council’s *Dei Verbum*, and which aim to move the church beyond that to a greater centrality in the life of the church.

b. Lausanne Movement - Cape Town Commitment

The document that arose from the Third Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization held in Cape Town in 2010 is a commitment to a holistic Gospel. There is a longing for growth *ad intra*, to maturity in the faith and a full-orbed missional living of the people of God,³³ and *ad extra*, reaching out to the “unreached and unengaged peoples”.³⁴

Christians are defined by the *missio Dei*, the story that “defines their identity and drives their mission”. It is the story that must shape “the memory and hope of God’s people and govern the content of their evangelistic witness, as it is passed on from generation to generation.”³⁵ There is therefore a need “to make the Bible known by all means possible, for its message is for all people on earth”, and a recommitment “to the ongoing task of translating, disseminating and teaching the scriptures in every culture and language, including those that are predominantly oral or non-literary.”³⁶

The Bible is indispensable to evangelism and discipleship, and this leads to a two-fold aim:

- a) to eradicate Bible poverty in the world, through hastening Bible translation into the languages which as yet have no Scripture, and by making the message of the Bible available by oral means;³⁷
- b) to eradicate Bible ignorance in the Church through “discipling believers into the likeness of Christ”.³⁸ In the session on “Scripture in Mission” during the conference Fergus Macdonald highlighted the “Biblical anorexia which is sapping the churches of spiritual power and evangelistic fervour”.³⁹

The existence of the ‘digital generation’ is also recognised together with the need to promote Bible literacy among them.⁴⁰ Local churches in the Global South are also encouraged to “engage with unreached people groups in their area through oral methods that are specific to their worldview”. This localization contrasts with other emphases in the document on the globalized media and emerging technologies, and the Christian presence in the public arena,⁴¹ yet it does recognise the shift that has taken place in the configuration of the church in the world. There is now, as Prof. Andrew Walls has said, “a post-Christian West and a post-western Christianity”—the church in the “north” and the church in the “south” and “east”—a diverse context that the Cape Town conference engages with.

The follow-up to Lausanne takes place in regional groupings which aim to address the issues that have been identified. While the changes in direction introduced in *Verbum Domini* are moving ahead. They have the advantage of being part of an incremental process being implemented at diocesan level, and promoted by local groupings of the Catholic Biblical Federation. The Cape Town Commitment is, it seems to me, less well known, perhaps due to the fragmented nature of the evangelical community.⁴²

6. Bible in Mission – some local initiatives

The following examples from Latin America and the United Kingdom illustrate the creative implementation and localisation of global mission strategies.

a. Making the Word available in Brazil

The rapid growth of evangelical and Pentecostal churches in Brazil—now representing at least 15% of the country's 190 million inhabitants—has created an ongoing demand for Bibles. The demand also comes from the Roman Catholic community. The implementation in the last 40+ years of *Dei Verbum* recommendations, plus the role of the base communities, have led to biblical renewal in the Roman Catholic Church.⁴³

The 'Bíblia Almeida' is the 'classic' Bible of Protestants, the NT was first published in 1681 and the OT in 1753. It has been revised many times since then. Herculano Alves shows convincingly that this Bible is the 'most widely distributed book in the Portuguese language' (over 110 million copies of all editions). Demand continues. The Brazil Bible Society has also developed the *Nova Tradução da Linguagem de Hoje*, the work of an interconfessional team, a Bible which is now used widely by evangelicals and Catholics. Its translation style and its study notes facilitate not only access and understanding of the Scriptures, but its use in interconfessional community groups.

Currently the Brazil BS prints and distributes over 5 million Bibles each year for Brazil, and also publishes in Spanish and produces in African languages (e.g. Yoruba, Igbo) to meet the needs of partner societies there.

b. Latin America's exploding youth population

Among the challenges facing the Church (and governments!) is the continent's high birthrate. In many countries fully 40% of the population is under 15. The average age in Mexico City, with 20+ million people, is fifteen and a half. When asked what his greatest challenge was, a Costa Rican priest immediately said 'how to catechize the cell phone generation'.⁴⁴

In 2006 the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM) and UBS began work on a *Lectio divina* programme for young people and children using a variety of media—print, music, radio and Internet. This multimedia initiative would provide access for different strata of society—individuals, families, schools, churches, parishes and dioceses—to network together throughout the continent. Technological and social networking developments since then moved the programme to a different level, as *Lectioautas*⁴⁵ for young people, and *Discipulitos*⁴⁶ for children show, with mp3 downloads, Facebook, etc. also finding a place.

Already over 12,500 young leaders from parishes in a dozen countries have been trained in the programme. They are introducing it in their churches and forming groups of young people using cell phones, computers and other technology to access the Biblical passages for their prayer, reflection and action. The young people themselves develop the programme in creative and innovative ways—texting has become a way of encouraging one another and sharing together their experiences of the Word. From its beginnings in Spanish, the programme is now available in other languages and is being accessed globally.

For this programme the Church's own language was one obstacle that had to be faced. The Aparecida document notes: "evangelization, catechesis, and pastoral ministry as a whole, are still speaking languages that mean little to contemporary

culture, and to young people in particular.⁴⁷ Here a new Spanish translation of the Bible for young people and children developed by a UBS interconfessional, inter-disciplinary team—the *Traducción en Lenguaje Actual*—has proved providential.⁴⁸

c. Peru – responding to violence

Domestic violence, spousal abuse, and child abuse are major concerns in Peru:

A World Health Organization study carried out in 2000 of women in the 15-49 age range in the greater Lima area showed that 51% of women have suffered physical or sexual violence at least once from their partner.⁴⁹

The Bible Society of Peru has developed Bible-based materials for use by churches—*Alto a la Violencia*—to create critical awareness and action on spousal abuse.⁵⁰ This has been extended to take into account the situation of sexual abuse of children and adolescents with materials for use in and by churches, as well as by a network of NGOs working in this area. An agreement has also been signed with the government's *Ministerio de la Mujer y Desarrollo Social* to develop together a programme using these materials in the nation's schools,⁵¹ a Bible Society app has also been developed for this.

d. Bible Society in England and Wales: Advocacy and Encounter

In the dystopia that is post-modern England, the Bible Society sums up its mission as *Making the Bible heard*, where the Bible is “available, accessible and credible”.⁵² Bible Society initiatives therefore aim to connect different narratives—cultural, personal and biblical—with the aim of transforming culture through the Word. Their advocacy involves confronting contemporary paradoxes and working in open, uncertain environments. It sees the need for telling stories, and *the* story, with the purpose of changing the prevailing discourse, leading to transformational change in society.

They identify the ‘drivers’ of change in society and aim to influence the change makers in order to bring something that is on the edges of society—i.e. the Bible—back into the centre. Their multi-faceted initiative of Scripture engagement has led to developments in the media, arts, politics⁵³ and education.⁵⁴ For them the nature of advocacy and encounter with the Bible involves wide-ranging research⁵⁵ and imaginative engagement initiatives to ‘change the conversation’ and re-tell the story.⁵⁶

e. Scottish Bible Society: The Bible in Religious Education in Scotland

Scotland has a Christian heritage reaching back at least to the arrival of St. Ninian in Galloway in the late 4th century. Contemporary Scotland is, however, now a multicultural, multifaith society. Religion continues as part of the school curriculum, albeit in a pluralistic context. The SBS ‘*Bibleworld*’ Centre in Edinburgh, and the ‘*Bibleworld*’ mobile unit, introduced schoolchildren and students to the Bible as part of religious education’s ‘Curriculum for Excellence’.

The programmes were designed to aid teachers and educationalists cover the Religious and Moral Education curriculum. Each workshop intentionally dealt with other areas including Expressive Arts, Health and Wellbeing, Literacy and Social Studies.

“We use Bible texts and historical events to help develop an understanding of Christian beliefs and practices and how they have been fundamental in the fabrication of our society in Scotland. We also examine social and religious values in context with Christianity and the message of the Bible.”⁵⁷

Changes in educational programmes and society in Scotland have now led to the restructuring of *Bibleworld* twenty-five years after it was launched. Yet the wide

use of the Centre and the mobile unit's visits around the country underlined the important role *Bibleworld* played in contemporary Scripture engagement in that period. In addition these resources came to be highly regarded by Scottish educational authorities.⁵⁸

Postlude

Wherever we are, global or local, urban or rural, print-based or digital, readers or not, we all read or hear the Bible from the standpoint of our different cultures. Yet the real truth is that the Bible "reads" us. The Bible becomes our interlocutor, questioning and challenging us. It makes us re-examine everything and points us to Jesus Christ, who is its Centre. He comes to us, and in a sense the Incarnation is re-enacted. The "Word becomes flesh" in terms of a specific culture. Jesus Christ becomes our "exegete", helping us to understand ourselves and giving true meaning to life. He is the source and destiny of culture, and therefore also its "exegesis". He guides us to a new and creative reading of our cultures, past and present. He judges them, purifying and transforming them. He leads them – and us – to fulfillment and fullness of life.

Appendix Challenges that face us ...⁵⁹

The symposium has underlined for us a number of ongoing challenges, e.g. the urgency of and the difficulties faced in Bible translation; the need for people to have the Scriptures in formats and media appropriate to them; the post-modern context in the West and engagement in a life-transforming way with the Word of God; the presentation of the Biblical story in societies where a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' prevails. While not minimising any of these, other challenges that might be included are:

1. Creation care as mission

Dr Chris Wright recently said, "Some Christians live and act as if the first two pages and the last two pages of their Bibles have been torn out—but the Bible begins with creation and ends with a new creation".⁶⁰ In his book *Surprised by Hope* N.T.Wright has helped Christians reframe their understanding of their role and responsibility towards Creation. The *EcoBiblia* edition of the United Bible Societies' Spanish *Traducción en Lenguaje Actual* and *The Green Bible* edition of the NRSV have also highlighted this.

A consensus on this has emerged in recent years. The Lausanne Cape Town Covenant states:

If Jesus is Lord of all the earth, we cannot separate our relationship to Christ from how we act in relation to the earth. For to proclaim the gospel that says 'Jesus is Lord' is to proclaim the gospel that includes the earth, since Christ's Lordship is over all creation. Creation care is thus a gospel issue within the Lordship of Christ.⁶¹

Pope Francis' 2015 *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* is the most comprehensive church document on the subject, dealing with the challenge of global environmental deterioration.⁶² The WCC 2012 document *Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* includes a section on 'eco-justice' (§§ 19-23). Meanwhile in its follow-up to the Lausanne meeting, the World Evangelical Alliance has created a *Creation Care Taskforce*, tasked with "equipping, connecting, and being a global voice for the evangelical community" in the area of creation care, "to help connect and leverage the capacities of evangelical creation care organizations for greater impact at national and global levels; continue raising awareness of creation care within the global evangelical community".⁶³

2. Hospitality as Mission - God's welcome in a world of difference

The contemporary situation in the Middle East and Europe, as in other parts of the world, faces us with the clamant needs of migrants today. The Bible is, in fact, an inspired and inspiring record of displaced and dispossessed peoples who have found communal identity and home with God. From the outset the people of God were reminded of their responsibility towards strangers:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.
(Deut 10.17-19)

Small wonder that it is the Jewish philosopher and Holocaust survivor Emanuel Levinas who reminds us that the unknown, unfamiliar 'other' is **the** religious question of today.

Christians were likewise reminded of their responsibility:

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.
(Heb 13.2)

For Christians *philoxenia* (love of the stranger) replaced *xenophobia* (unreasonable fear or hatred of the stranger). Jesus Christ is God's welcome to us, God the host welcoming the stranger, those who were 'not a people' become 'the people of God' and find an identity, a home and a community. Hospitality in community is a sharing of the openness of Christ to all, just as he welcomed us into God's kingdom. It is the sharing of God's hospitality with the stranger, who is the 'other'.

3. From the printed page to the culture of the image

We have moved from a form of culture shaped on the ideas, world-views, authorities and institutions of print-based understanding to forms of culture being reshaped by electronic media of communication. Our world has been redefined by the Internet and the new global language is digital.

In today's world the communication media are really the new 'Areopagus'. While the new media are impacting us globally, our societies (and different segments within individual societies) are impacted in different ways and degrees. In Latin America, for instance, pre-modernity, modernity and post modernity coexist in the same country. There are multiple literacies, different media languages and discourse strategies. These require investigation and evaluation to determine the way ahead.

The Internet is certainly a new 'forum' understood in the ancient Roman sense of that public space where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display. It was a crowded and bustling urban space, which both reflected the surrounding culture and created a culture of its own. This is no less true of cyberspace, which is a new frontier which opened up at the beginning of the new millennium. Like the new frontiers of other times, this one too is full of the interplay of danger and promise, and not without the sense of adventure which marked other great periods of change.

Jesus himself related to people in their daily life and, by way of parables, reminded them that he was the one who communicated the Father to them. In this way

Jesus' 'live communication' had an iconic basis, which illustrated and exemplified in a live, dynamic, understandable way the realities of the Kingdom of God. He is not only the word and image of the Father, his preferred communication style was iconic, testimonial and narrative, rather than rhetorical or doctrinal. His parables were a "theatre of symbols"— images taken from earthly realities to communicate the reality revealed by God. This captivated those who heard and saw him, and led many to become his followers.

Christians throughout the ages have exercised Spirit-led creativity in the communication of the faith, Ephrem and others like John of Damascus being part of that number. We are called to respond to the promptings of the same Creator Spirit in our own day and age.

4. Violence in the Bible

The issue of violence in the Bible was brought home to me recently as I was preparing daily reading notes in Spanish on the book of Deuteronomy. It went well until I came to ch 7, with the command to exterminate the people of Canaan, destroy their religious sites, etc. and again, later in the book, in ch.20, with the call to the 'holy war'. As I thought of those who would use these notes, I realised that the current example of such actions that might come to their minds was that of the atrocities now taking place in Syria and Iraq in the name of religion.

Violence in the Bible, especially the OT, is fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence. We can perhaps understand 'man's inhumanity to man', but it is more difficult when that violence is seemingly divinely sanctioned or commanded, or when it is executed by God. Violence stalks through the Bible--in Genesis alone:

4.9 'Where is your brother Abel?' Cf. 4.6 'if you do not do well, sin is lurking at your door; its desire is for you, but you must master it'.

6.11 'Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence (כָּפַר). How do we understand the response of the flood? Violent?

14.14 Abraham and his 318 men...

16.6,9 'your slave girl is in your power; do to her as you please'; 'then Sarah dealt harshly with her...'; yet even then the word to Hagar was: 'return to your mistress and submit to her'.

22.11,12 'Abraham, Abraham, do the child no harm...'

34 The rape of Dinah and its counter violence.

39 ff. Joseph—we applaud his rejection of seduction, do we also applaud his enslavement of the population?

1.27,28 Violence to the text? The translation community and 1.27,28. 'Let us make ????? in our image'. *adam* - 'man'... or might 'humankind' enable a better understanding of the text?

This violence has many faces, whether it relates to the patriarchal culture enshrined in the text, or the male dominance and male rhetoric that pervades it, and its devaluing and oppression of women. In seeking responses to violence in its multiple expressions, we are pastorally faced with the question: Is Scripture a resource or a roadblock? The Bishop of Oslo has traced out for us ways in which we might approach this, but clearly there is still much work to be done. Happily, in what relates to roles and relationships between the sexes, scholars such as Dr Elsa Tamez are now enabling us to read the text through a different lens.

5. Storytelling and performance

People have been telling stories for as long as we have had speech. Many cultures still maintain a rich oral tradition, even though they are now being impacted by the mass media. At the same time, there has been a striking recovery of story and narrative today in societies where print culture has traditionally prevailed. This is taking place in education (especially literacy), entertainment, health services (e.g.

drama therapy, 'reminiscence' projects), spirituality, and evangelism. The online diary, or blog, is one form of storytelling. Meanwhile, the Lausanne Covenant reminds us of the immense challenge of communicating Scripture in oral cultures.

In the field of Biblical Studies recent decades have seen a growing interest in matters of orality, literacy and memory, which some would date to the publication of Werner Kelber's *The Oral and Written Gospel: The Hermeneutics of Speaking and Writing in the Synoptic Tradition, Mark, Paul and Q* in 1983. This was taken up by scholars such as Tom Boomershine who applied it both to storytelling and the new media.

Recent studies in the Gospels have drawn attention to their oral communication environment and to the close relation between written text and oral performance. The NT scholar, James Dunn, for instance, suggests the possibility that relationships among the Gospels lie in performance rather than written texts.⁶⁴ Literacy was limited to a socio-cultural elite in the Roman empire, and so models based on the role of cultural memory and cultural texts have been found useful. Within that communication context "texts" are speech acts, where the "text" can be understood as "a message that is repeated, remembered, recovered and referred to".⁶⁵ The field has been enriched by the application of performance theory and performance criticism to Biblical texts. Advocates of this approach encourage reading with others, particularly from races, cultures, and genders other than one's own.

In the Old Testament itself there are examples of the prophetic word being dramatised in the body of the prophet, who is both its subject (speaker) and its object (victim). A prophet such as Ezekiel is often overwhelmed by 'his' text, which shows its control of him rather than his control of it. They point to ways in which texts might be 're-performed' today. Yvonne Sherwood, for instance, suggests that in such 're-performance' today the Biblical 'text' should be juxtaposed with "fragments of the contemporary" to achieve a mutual exegesis and critique⁶⁶—an approach reminiscent of Ephrem's 'reciprocal hermeneutic'.

Storytelling and performance hold out rich promise in the many varied contexts where we are called to share the Word today.

Endnotes

1 Larry Hurtado. "Early Christianity – A Bookish Religion: Reading, Writing and Disseminating Texts". Peter Craigie Memorial Lecture, University of Calgary. January 12th, 2016.

2 E.g. homilies, treatises, martyr stories, documents on church order. See, for instance the *Didache*, 1 Clement, Epistle of Barnabas.

3 Richard Bauckham, ed. 1988. *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans: 2.

4 See particularly Sebastian Brock. 2006. *The Bible in the Syriac Tradition*. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, pp. 73-95.

5 Carmen Maier. 2012. *Poetry as Exegesis: Ephrem the Syrian's Method of Scriptural Interpretation*. Ph.D dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 3.3.3.1.

6 For example, Cain and Abel (Gen 4), Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Gen 39), the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary (Lk 1.26-28).

7 Maier, op. cit., 3.3.3.2.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Brock, op. cit., p.81.

10 See <http://www.biblicalperformancecriticism.org/>

- 11 *The trilingual catechism (Spanish, Quechua and Aymara) of the Third Lima Council, published in 1584, was the first book published in South America.*
- 12 Jorge Seibold. 1993. *La Sagrada Escritura en la Evangelización de América Latina*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones Paulinas, p.93..
- 13 Perhaps its greatest achievement was the Complutensian Polyglot Bible. One former Alcalá student, José de Acosta S.J., wrote the first missionary book written in the 'New World': *De Procuranda Indorum Salute*. First drafted in Peru in 1577, it contains over 900 quotations from the Bible.
- 14 In the This was Font/Pitch 1,10 - Off.This was Font/Pitch 4,10 - On.ProemioThis was Font/Pitch 4,10 - Off. This was Font/Pitch 1,10 - On. to his work he quotes St. Paul's teaching on the gift of tongues (1 Cor 14) to support his point of view. He himself championed the use of the vernacular: "the one who confesses in a language he neither knows nor understands commits mortal sin".
- 15 Oré's *Symbolo Catholico Indiano*, published in Lima in 1598, gives ample evidence of the link between the Bible and sacred songs. The book contains the largest collection of Quechua hymns from the 16th. century, some of which are still sung today.
- 16 Guaman Poma de Ayala. 1980 [1609]. *Nueva corónica y buen gobierno*. John V. Murra and Rolena Adorno, eds. Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno, p.850.
- 17 Gabriel Naranjo S. 2005. "El caminar de la Pastoral Bíblica antes y después del Concilio en América Latina". *La Palabra Hoy* XXX.16: 40.
- 18 Lamin Sanneh refers to "God's work in history leaving global footprints"—"Post-Western Wine, Post-Christian Wineskins? The Bible and the Third Wave Awakening" in William Burrows, Mark R. Gornik, and Janice A. McLean, eds. *Understanding World Christianity: The Vision and Work of Andrew F. Walls*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 102.
- 19 "Bible translation, the Quechua people and Protestant church growth in the Andes" in Pauline Hoggarth, Knud Jørgensen, Fergus Macdonald, Bill Mitchell, eds. *Bible in Mission*. Oxford: Regnum Books International : 216-223.
- 20 *The deaths in 1956 of five evangelical missionaries from the USA in the Ecuadorian jungle was widely reported and led to a significant increase in US missionaries to South America's indigenous peoples in the 1960s. See Elisabeth Elliot, Through Gates of Splendour.*
- 21 <https://www.unitedbiblesocieties.org/translation/global-scripture-access/> (Accessed 20 February 2016).
- 22 Paul Soukup. 2013. "Information Management and the Delivery of the Bible" in Pauline Hoggarth, Pauline, Knud Jørgensen, Fergus Macdonald, Bill Mitchell, eds. 2013. *Bible in Mission*. Oxford: Regnum Books International., pp. 273-280.
- 23 Lamin Sanneh. 2003. *Whose Religion is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 106-7.
- 24 The previous conferences were held in Rio de Janeiro (1955), Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979) and Santo Domingo (1992).
- 25 CELAM, 2007. *Documento Conclusivo: Aparecida, 13-21 de mayo de 2007*. Bogota: Conferencia Episcopal Latinoamericana. §247.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Op. cit.*, §249.
- 28 *One of those involved in the drafting of those conclusions was then Argentinean Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, now better known as Pope Francis.*
- 29 «Animatio biblica totius actionis pastoralis».
- 30 Benedict XVI. 2010. *Verbum Domini*. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. §73.
- 31 *Verbum Domini*, §86, 87.
- 32 *Verbum Domini*, §115.
- 33 Ephesians 4:11-12.
- 34 *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action*. Part IV.1.
- 35 *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action*. Part I.6.b.
- 36 *Ibid.*
- 37 This is extensively developed in Part IV.2 of the document, highlighting both 'primary oral learners' and 'secondary oral learners'— "those who are technically literate but prefer now to communicate in an oral manner, with the rise of visual learning and the dominance of images in communication".
- 38 *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action*. Part IV.1.c-d.

- 39 <https://www.lausanne.org/content/scripture-in-mission-fergus-macdonald-2>.
- 40 *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action*. Part IV.1. d. 2.
- 41 *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action*. Part II. 2, 4-7.
- 42 A few weeks ago Dr Chris Wright, one of the authors of the Cape Town document, gave the Downey Lectures in Ambrose University, Calgary, Alberta, Canada (10-11 February) on 'Integral Mission'. It was interesting to me that prior to the lectures many of the audience had little knowledge on the Cape Town document. In recent visits to Latin America I have sensed a certain unease about the document, in that delegates felt they did not have the input to the document that they could have had.
- 43 "No one really knows how to explain it. The Catholic Church in Brazil has been completely caught up in people's interest in the Bible in a way never before seen in its history" – Fr. Carlos Mesters cited in De Almeida Cunha, 2008:70.
- 44 Personal conversation with Fr. Omar Solís, Bogotá, 1 June 2005.
- 45 www.lectionautas.com.
- 46 www.discipulitos.com. Now 'reprogrammed' as www.cristonautas.com.
- 47 CELAM. 2007. *Op. cit.*: §100d.
- 48 Edesio Sánchez, "Children, Theology and Translation in Latin America: *La Traducción en Lenguaje Actual*". Paper presented at the SBL Annual Meeting, New Orleans, 21-24 November 2009.
- 49 Rhoda E. Mitchell, 2008. *Empowering Women and Including Men: A Case Study of Gender-Based Violence in San Juan de Lurigancho, Peru*. Unpublished MSW thesis, University of Calgary. http://www.ucalgary.ca/md/PARHAD/documents/2008-Empowering_Women_and_Including_Men.pdf, p.13.
- 50 www.sbp.org.pe.
- 51 See "Cartilla educativa para niños y adolescentes busca prevenir el maltrato y la violencia sexual". www.sbp.org.pe.
- 52 <http://www.christianmarketplace.org.uk/engine.cfm?i=43&cma=1717>.
- 53 E.g. *The Bible Society public theology think tank Theos*.
- 54 E.g. *The BIBLOS* Education and the Bible research initiative (with Exeter University).
- 55 E.g. 'Bible in Pastoral Use' (with Cardiff University), 'Scripture and Hermeneutics' (with Cheltenham & Gloucester College of Higher Education).
- 56 E.g. *Interfacing with contemporary 'cultural icons' such as the TV 'soap opera' 'Eastenders'*.
- 57 www.bibleworld.co.uk.
- 58 See also Fergus Macdonald. 2007. *The Psalms and Spirituality*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Ph.D thesis; p.7.
- 59 *The final session of the symposium dealt with the challenges we face--these are some of the reflections I shared then.*
- 60 'Bibel i misjon', Menighetsfakultetet, Oslo. 10 March 2016.
- 61 Downey Lecture, Ambrose University, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. 11 February 2016.
- 62 *The Cape Town Commitment: A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action*, 1.7a.
- 63 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.
- 64 <http://www.worldevangelicals.org/cctf/>
- 65 Bishop Ole Christian Kvarme, 'Bibelen som misjonens hjerte' - paper presented in 'Bibel i misjon', Menighetsfakultetet, Oslo. 10 March 2016.
- 66 *Jesus Remembered*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. Pp. 248-9.
- 67 Jan Assmann. 2006. "Form as a Mnemonic Device: Cultural Texts and Cultural Memory" in Richard A. Horsley, Jonathan A Draper, John Miles Foley, eds. *Performing the Gospel: Orality, Memory and Mark*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. P.75.
- 68 "Prophetic performance art", *The Bible and Critical Theory (2006) 2(1): 1.1-1.4*.