

Carrying the Word Forward

By Jessica Albers

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A History of Mission: Carrying the Word Forward

When we talk about mission history, our minds often drift to sepia-toned photographs of missionaries with trunks and typewriters, jungle paths, and translation notebooks weathered by the sun. These stories matter deeply. They are stories of courage, conviction, and calling. But they are also chapters in an ongoing narrative, one that stretches from the first disciples to modern-day translators who continue to bring God's Word into every language.

For centuries, the Church has been sent, across borders, generations, and cultures, to proclaim Christ crucified and risen. The history of mission is not simply a record of travel and translation; it is the history of God's faithfulness as His Word takes root in new hearts. Each era has been marked by transformation, not only of those who hear the Gospel but also of the methods and means by which the Gospel is shared.

A Legacy of Word and Witness

When Lutheran Bible Translators ([LBT](#)) was founded in 1964, the goal was simple but audacious: to ensure that every person could access Scripture in the language that they understand best. The founders understood that language is not just a tool: it's identity, memory, and belonging. From the beginning, their mission was grounded in the Lutheran understanding that the Word is not bound. God's grace, spoken and heard, transcends borders.

Early translators spent years in remote villages, learning languages face-to-face, developing orthographies, and typing translations one key at a time. Their work took patience and presence—a long obedience in the same direction. Those foundational decades laid the groundwork for Bible translation movements across the globe. Thousands of communities have since received the Word in their own tongue, worshipping with a joy and intimacy that only the mother tongue can bring.

But the mission doesn't end with the printed Bible. In many ways, it is only the beginning.

Yesson Mayo with Helen Marten, circa 1975



The Church at the Speed of Change

Today, we are living in an unprecedented moment in mission history. Never before has the world been so connected—or so complex. Linguistic diversity meets digital possibility. The question facing modern missions is not *whether* to adapt but *how* to adapt faithfully.

For Bible translation, this means embracing innovation without losing incarnation. It means leveraging new tools to accelerate the work while keeping people and relationships at the center.

At Lutheran Bible Translators, that innovation takes many forms. Cloud-based translation software allows teams to collaborate across continents. Artificial intelligence supports linguistic analysis, helping identify grammatical structures in previously unwritten languages. Mobile apps deliver Scripture directly into the hands of readers who may never own a printed Bible. And communities once limited by geography now engage in training, feedback, and discipleship through digital networks.

Yet technology is not the hero of the story; it's a vessel. What truly defines the modern era of mission is agility: the ability to respond quickly and thoughtfully to real-world needs, to pivot when circumstances change, and to ensure that every decision keeps God's Word accessible and alive in context.

Innovation Rooted in Relationship

One of the most profound shifts in mission work has been the move from doing ministry *for* communities to doing ministry *with* them. The role of the missionary has evolved from solitary translator to collaborator, coach, and advocate.

This is where innovation meets humility. Agile project management—once the domain of tech startups—is now guiding translation teams in the field. The approach values transparency, adaptability, and feedback loops, allowing teams to review progress regularly, identify challenges early, and adjust priorities together.

Rather than waiting years for a “completed” Bible to be printed, portions of Scripture are shared as soon as they are ready. Communities can engage immediately—hearing the Gospel of Luke, the Psalms, or Genesis in their own language within months instead of decades. Churches and local leaders become co-owners of the work, shaping not only the language but the very form of how God’s Word is experienced.



Mpoki – Rev79 Training

From Page to Heart: The Power of Story

In many parts of the world, literacy is not the first or primary way people learn. Oral storytelling remains the heartbeat of culture. Recognizing this, Bible translation organizations are using ancient methods for modern mission—training local believers to tell Bible stories accurately and beautifully in their language.

These oral Bible storytelling initiatives are not a substitute for translation but a complement to it. They invite communities to hear Scripture as it was first heard—spoken, remembered, and lived. Story by story, people encounter the living Word, and in doing so, they become storytellers themselves.

In Ghana, Botswana, and Ethiopia, storytelling workshops bring together pastors, mothers, and youth leaders to memorize and share the stories of creation, the prophets, and the life of Christ. Each retelling plants the Word more deeply in memory and culture, creating pathways for future literacy and discipleship. The innovation lies not in replacing the Bible, but in expanding how people encounter it—through the spoken word, the written word, and the digital word. Every method points to the same truth: God speaks.



The Mission Continues

A history of mission is, ultimately, a history of faithfulness—God’s and ours. It is the story of how He continues to draw people to Himself through His Word, equipping His Church to meet every generation where they are.

As we look to the future, the horizon of Bible translation is both exhilarating and humbling. Collaborative translation platforms, localized leadership, and sustainable funding models mean that more communities than ever before are taking the lead in their own translation journeys.

And the ripple effect goes far beyond the text. When a community engages with Scripture, transformation follows: education improves, relationships strengthen, hope rises. People discover that they are seen, known, and loved by the Creator who speaks their language.

Carrying the Torch Forward

To tell the story of mission today is to recognize that we are heirs to a remarkable legacy. Those early pioneers who carried trunks and typewriters paved the way for translators carrying laptops and solar-powered audio devices. The methods have changed, but the message has not. The Word still goes forth, and it will not return empty.

As the Church, we stand on their shoulders—not to repeat their steps, but to walk faithfully in their direction. Our tools are different, our challenges unique, but our calling is the same: to bring God’s Word to every heart and every tongue.

And so, the history of mission is not a story that ends—it’s one still being written.



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