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Bible Translation and the Great Commission — The Continuing Task

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The link between the availability of vernacular translations of the Bible and the growth of the church is made clear by Harriet Hill in the current issue of the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*. As Ms. Hill, a veteran Bible translator, explains, churches without access to the Scripture in their mother tongue tend to die or decline (as in Alexandria) while churches with vernacular translations tend to survive, even when persecuted (such as in Madagascar and China).

Consider also her historical review of how the Bible has been translated in recent centuries:

During the first 1,800 years of Christianity, Scripture was translated into about 70 languages. During the nineteenth century, the number of people called to missionary service increased dramatically. Wherever they went, they encountered a language barrier. If they intended to communicate, they had to learn the local language, and in order to communicate God's Word, they had to translate it into the local language. The result was Scripture in 460 more languages during the nineteenth century, a quantum and unprecedented leap.

In the twentieth century, the pace of Bible translation accelerated even more. Between 1900 and the year 2000, a total of 1,768 more language communities received Scripture in their mother tongue for the first time. By the year 2004 the number of languages with Scripture totaled 2,388.

Nevertheless, Ms. Hill indicates that, even at the current pace, it would take another 125 to 150 years to translate the Bible into all the world's remaining languages.

She also argues for a new paradigm for translation work, noting that much of the current energy is found among native-speakers who are doing the bulk of the work, assisted by missionaries "serving as technical advisers."

She ends by citing a statement on Bible translation adopted by groups working in Africa which helpfully asserts that "no language is better than another to communicate with God," and that "no church can last long without the Word of God in a language the people can understand."

The article, "The Vernacular Treasure: A Century of Mother-Tongue Bible Translation," is available only to subscribers. Harriet Hill has given us all the encouragement we should need to press for increased support and energy behind this vital calling — the translation of the Bible into the mother tongues of the world.

