

The Gateway Languages Strategy

Equipping the global Church with unrestricted biblical resources

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Executive Summary – The objective of the Gateway Languages Strategy is to equip the global Church with the content, tools and training materials needed for translation of the Bible and creation of contextualized, theologically-sound biblical resources in every language needed by the global Church. It does so by providing these resources under open licenses and then collaborating with Church networks worldwide to translate them into the ~50 Languages of Wider Communication that cover 100% of the global Church through patterns of multilingualism (the Gateway Languages). In this way, every element of the Church in each people group is provided with essential biblical resources in a language they understand and that they have the legal freedom to use for Bible translation and creation of other biblical resources in their own languages.

1. The Two Obstacles

In 2001, without any fanfare or announcement, a people group in Papua New Guinea decided that they were not going to wait any longer for a missionary to translate the Bible into their language. They had asked for help more than ten years before, but no help had come. The element of the Church in this people group was going to start translating the Bible into their own language, for themselves.¹

But two obstacles hindered them from their objective. The first was a language problem: the full array of Bible translation training, exegetical resources and software needed in order to translate the Bible efficiently and with excellence was only available in English. Some of the Church leaders in the people group spoke some English, but they were not sufficiently bilingual to use English-only resources effectively and with confidence. The second obstacle was a legal one: the element of the Church in this people group could not legally use many of the translation resources, even if they could understand them. The licenses governing the use of the resources only applied to Bible translators who were members of certain Western missionary organizations.

These same obstacles still hinder the Church in thousands of people groups all over the world today. Many biblical resources that could be used effectively by the global Church to end their own spiritual famine are available only in English, and the vast majority of them are restricted by licenses that prevent the Church from using them. The existence of this “walled garden” of biblical content that is only available to some (but not others) may be neither immoral or illegal, but it is real nonetheless, and it locks out immense numbers of the global Church.²

This paper describes a strategy for equipping the global Church with unrestricted biblical resources by removing these two obstacles of language limitations and legal restrictions.

2. The Global Need

The global need for Bible translation is much greater than the most common statistics indicate. Frequently, the assumption is that the only remaining new translation work is for a subset of a static number of languages that have no known Scripture (most current estimates list the need between 1,500-3,500). But this number is only part of the total need. In addition to those needs, the Church also needs revisions (and sometimes restarts) of “finished” translations, completions of translation projects, translations using different scripts and cultural forms of the language,³ translations into multiple dialects, audio recordings for oral people groups, completions of the entire Bible (not merely New Testaments), and so on. All told, the *remaining* global need across all formats and speech varieties could easily be in excess of 10,000.⁴

¹ This document attempts to distinguish between the “global Church” (the household of God (Ephesians 2:19), the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:12), the sum total of all believers in the one faith (Ephesians 4:5), including all languages and cultures, and including all traditions that are faithful expressions of sound doctrine) and “a language community in the global Church” (i.e., an element of the global Church that is linguistically homogenous, speaking either the same language or variants that have a sufficient degree of mutual intelligibility, and including all traditions that are faithful expressions of sound doctrine (1 Timothy 6:3; Titus 2:1)). The use of these terms is intended to affirm the unity of the Church, while also recognizing the ecclesiological and missiological implications (particularly in terms of effective use of Bible translations and biblical resources) inherent in the existence of one global Church that speaks many languages.

² This “walled garden” is explained in detail by the author in *The Christian Commons*, 16.

³ For example, a “dominant culture variant” (DCV) refers to a cultural register of a language that is used by some believers who are recently converted from the dominant religion in a given region of the world. Their beliefs have changed, but the form of the language they speak has not. Existing translations that employ a “Christian background” variant of the language are generally unusable and are sometimes perceived as offensive by the elements of the Church that more closely identify with the dominant culture.

⁴ As a conservative “back of the envelope” estimate, the Church-assessed total global Bible translation need could be the sum of 6,389 (assuming 90% of the world’s 7,099 languages need a translation) + 950 (assuming 25% of the ~3,800 known dialects need a translation) + 109 (assuming 1% of the 10,899 language variants need an additional script or cultural variant translation) + 5,450 (assuming 50% of all language vari-

To further complicate the picture, the actual (rather than assumed) needs in a particular language can only be self-assessed by the element of the Church that speaks the language. This means that globally, the aggregate number of translation needs are not only immense but variable. For example, how would an outsider know that the members of the Church in an African people group decided today that they need a separate translation of the Bible in each of their dialects? If dozens of language communities in the global Church decide tomorrow that they need audio Bibles in their languages, how will those who count such things know?

The Church is growing at an unprecedented rate across cultural and linguistic boundaries, even in some of the most resistant parts of the world.⁵ This rise of the global Church and the subsequent self-assessment of translation need by the element of the Church in each language may result in an aggregate need so vast and dynamic through time that arriving at a precise number may not be possible. This suggests that exclusive reliance on linear production models and traditional product-focused metrics will be of limited usefulness going forward. It may be that new models and new metrics are needed in order to effectively meet the need of the global Church.⁶

3. A Historical Model: Push

In the last two centuries, the predominant model for Bible translation was based on an “outside-in” approach. Frequently, this model was employed in people groups where the Church had not yet been established.

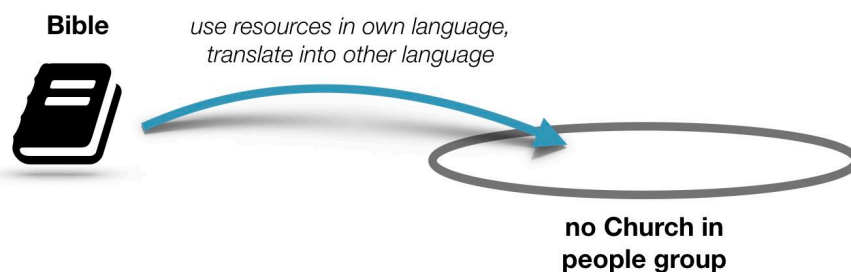


Diagram 1: “outside-in” Bible translation

ants need an audio Bible), giving a total need of 12,898. Subtracting completed Bibles (-700) and completed audio Bibles (-1,100, *note: statistics for complete Bibles are not available, so this number also includes languages with only audio New Testaments*) leaves a remaining global need today that is well over 10,000. It should be noted that this is almost certainly a low estimate, especially as some reports suggest the number of dialects is far higher. Furthermore, it does not take into account the expressed need of many Church leaders for interlinear Greek/Hebrew Bibles, Study Bibles, and other Bible study resources, in addition to a translation of the Bible in their own language. (References for these calculations include Simons and Fennig, *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Twentieth Edition*; Global Recordings Network, “Registry of Dialects”; Wycliffe Global Alliance, “Scripture & Language Statistics 2016”; and Faith Comes By Hearing, “Celebrating 1000.”)

⁵ Jenkins has helped document this growth: “Over the last century, however, the center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted inexorably away from Europe, southward, to Africa and Latin America, and eastward, toward Asia. Today, the largest Christian communities on the planet are to be found in those regions.” *The Next Christendom*. Johnstone’s research supports the same conclusion: “The expansion of Christianity between 1950 and 2000 has no parallel in history. At its heart were the revival of Evangelical and Catholic enthusiasm for missions, and the global growth of Pentecostal denominations and Charismatic networks, all facilitated by global conferences and networking. The result was massive church growth in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia, and the spread of Evangelicalism throughout the Americas. These gains offset the big losses in Europe and the Pacific. The Church truly became worldwide for the first time in history.” *The Future of the Global Church*, 94.

⁶ This transition and the corresponding shift in metrics is addressed below in the section titled “From Linear to Exponential.”

This was the predominant model for much of the 20th century when people (frequently from Europe and North America) sensed God’s call to the work of Bible translation and joined one of the organizations dedicated to this work. As part of their preparation, they received linguistic and anthropological training designed to enable them, as cultural and linguistic outsiders, to live among an unreached people group and create a translation of the Bible in their language. This model was designed to push the translation of the Bible from English into the target language. God has blessed the use of this model and many ethnolinguistic churches around the world owe their existence to the dedicated perseverance of missionaries and Bible translators who served them in this way.

This approach may still be necessary in some contexts, but it is of limited effectiveness in many others. Furthermore, the good intent of “reaching every language” is often blocked by the limitations of institutional capacity that result in shortfalls of funding or personnel. The limitations of this centralized model have prevented it from scaling efficiently to meet the immense global needs for Bible translation.

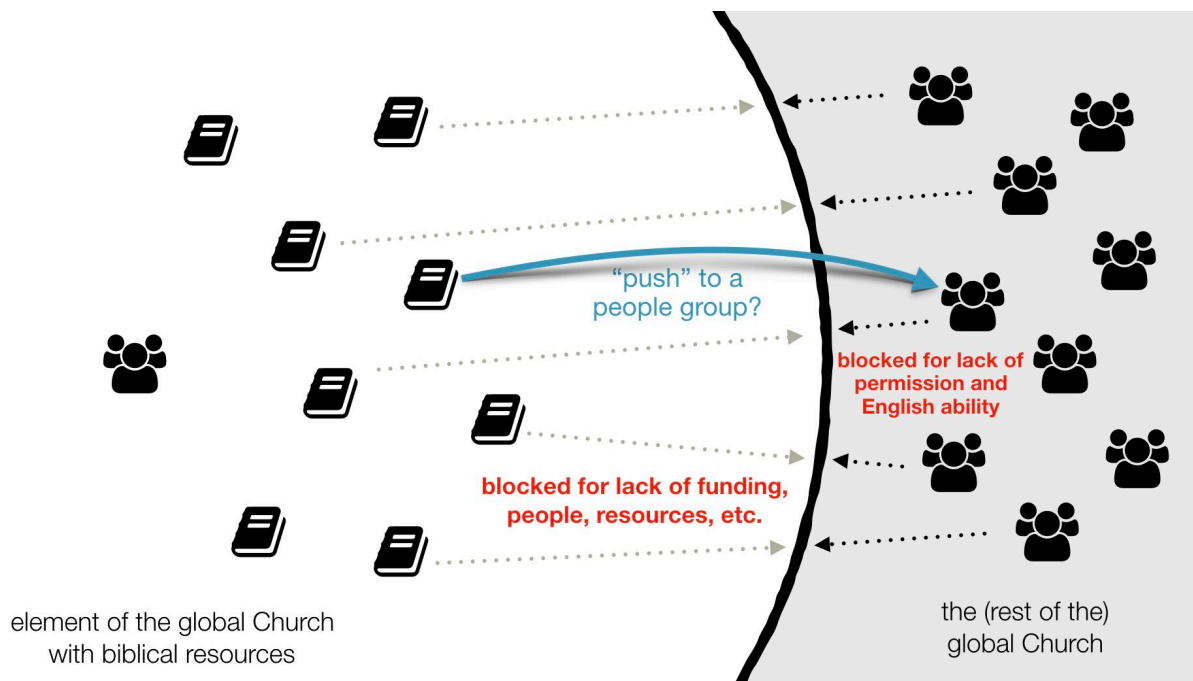


Diagram 2: The “push” model of Bible translation

This model is further limited because it implicitly assumes that anyone translating the Bible has the ability in English necessary to use the available exegetical resources and translation training resources.⁷ It also requires that anyone translating the Bible be formally connected to the traditional consortium of Bible translation organizations or have some other means of obtaining a license that grants them legal permission to use the English resources.

⁷ This is not to say that these resources only exist in English. Some biblical resources are available in other languages of wider communication, such as German, Spanish, French, etc. What is in view here is the existence (or lack thereof) of high quality resources that are particularly intended to provide the global Church with what is needed for excellence in Bible translation and creation of other biblical resources.

4. An Emerging Model: Pull

Bible translation in recent history has generally been an externally-driven process, but this is changing. Many Church networks that do not speak English and are not affiliated with Bible translation organizations are becoming directly involved in translating the Bible for themselves.⁸ This “church-centric” process begins from within the people group as they reach outward to use source texts and exegetical resources in a language of wider communication and then translate into their language.⁹

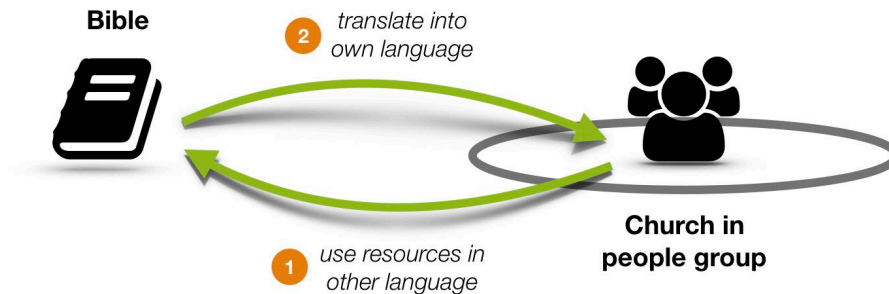


Diagram 3: “inside-in” Bible translation

The process of using resources (e.g., source texts, exegetical helps, etc.) for Bible translation carries with it intrinsic legal implications. Unless resources are made available under licenses that permit the global Church to freely use them and create legally-unencumbered derivative works, the Church is faced with the undesirable prospect of needing to break the laws of men to build the Kingdom of God. By addressing the issues of the licenses under which translation resources are released, no element of the global Church will ever have to make this choice. The strategy proposed here reflects this “inside-in” process and decisively addresses the intrinsic legal implications using a model that can scale to meet the current and future needs of the global Church.

5. The Context for a More Capable Model

The rate of change in the world today is increasing rapidly.¹⁰ Two of the most powerful drivers of this acceleration are globalization and the vast reach of mobile communication technology. Globalization has connected virtually the entire world in a complex network of increasing economic opportunity. Mobile phones and related technologies have made it possible for nearly anyone to be part of it.¹¹

⁸ Maxey observes: “Now in the 21st Century, the responsibility of translation is increasingly once again the task of first-language speakers and the local church, if one exists. Moreover, the surge in new translation projects led by Global South Christians continues to accelerate as more people realize the practical theological necessity of Bible translation in discipleship and church planting.” Maxey, “Translation Consultancy: Ways Forward.”

⁹ This is not to say that cultural and linguistic “outsiders” are no longer needed, but that as the element of the Church within a people group assumes ownership of and responsibility for their own Bible translations, the service that other elements of the global Church provide to them will change accordingly.

¹⁰ Some analyses suggest the rate of change is itself compounding, as the numbers of new technologies, their storage and processing capacity, the numbers of connected people, the numbers of connected devices, and the speed of data connections are all increasing simultaneously. See Kotter, “Can You Handle an Exponential Rate of Change?”; Scott-Morgan, *The Reality of Our Global Future*.

¹¹ This does not deny the reality of global poverty; it observes that mobile phones and globalization have a generally positive effect even on the poor. See Voigt, “Mobile Phone.” Freeland describes the magnitude of this change: “Today two terrifically powerful forces are driving economic change: the technology revolution and globalization... together they constitute a dramatic gearshift comparable in its power and scale to the

Worldwide, these factors have contributed to the growth of multinational corporations and local industries which employ billions of people. The prospect of employment in the cities continues to increase the global imbalance of the urban population over the rural.¹² But in order for people who speak different languages to live and work together in close proximity, they must share a common language. The result is that multilingualism is now the norm worldwide, and truly monolingual language communities are so rare they tend to make the news if discovered.¹³ This implies that every people group now has (or will soon have) people who are functionally bilingual in a language of wider communication.

From a missiological perspective, this global spread of multilingualism provides a strategic opportunity. To the extent that the Church in each people group is bilingual in a language of wider communication, they have access (with regard to language ability) to biblical resources in that language.¹⁴ Given adequate biblical resources in that language of wider communication and the legal freedom to use those resources for Bible translation and creation of other content, a global shift to an “inside-in” model in every people group where the Church exists becomes possible.

6. The “Pull” Model at a Global Scale

When biblical resources in English are made available under an open license, all people groups with believers who are adequately bilingual in English can understand and use them for translation and creation of other resources without hindrance. But *only* these people groups can use the content. However, if the same content is also available in Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic (for example), the elements of the Church that understand these languages also gain access to the resources.

industrial revolution... What these twin transformations have done is trigger an industrial revolution-sized burst of growth in much of the rest of the world—China, India, and some other parts of the developing world are now going through their own gilded ages.” Freeland, *Plutocrats*.

¹² According to Johnstone, “In 1800, only 3% of humankind lived in cities. It is estimated that in 2100 the figure will be nearly 90%... The 21st Century will be the first urban century in history.” *The Future of the Global Church*.

¹³ The rise of multilingualism and the role of globalization and technology in shaping the global sociolinguistic context is described in *The Handbook of Language and Globalization*.

¹⁴ The strategic model proposed in this paper assumes that the general pattern of bilingualism within the Church in a given people group is consistent with that of the people group as a whole. To date, observed patterns of multilingualism within Church networks in various parts of the world suggest this is a safe assumption, but it is deserving of further study.

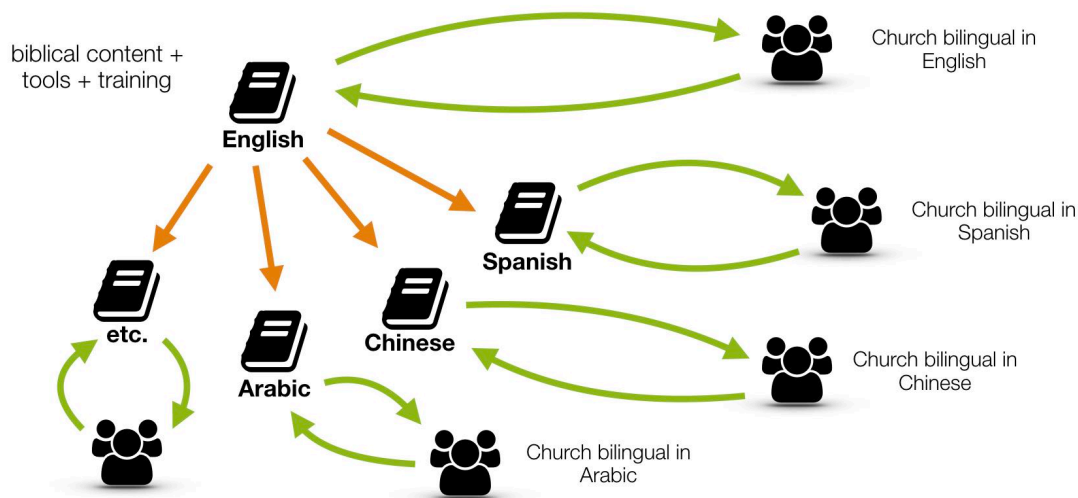


Diagram 4: Gateway Languages Bible translation

This brings us to a strategic question: **What is the smallest number of languages of wider communication in which biblical content is needed in order to provide it to 100% of people groups through global patterns of multilingualism?**

Recent research suggests that global language use patterns are resulting in a convergence into approximately fifty highly strategic languages of wider communication. The term “gateway language” was coined to refer to these languages of wider communication that, in the aggregate, cover all people groups and languages through patterns of multilingualism.

The foundational assumption on which the strategy described in this paper rests is that once all of these Gateway Languages (GLs) are identified and adequate biblical content is made available under open licenses in each one, the global Church will have universal access—in terms of language use and legal permission—to the biblical resources needed for Bible translation and theological formation in every language.¹⁵ The list of these Gateway Languages (GLs) is being actively researched as part of the unfoldingWord project: unfoldingword.org/gateway.

7. The Gateway Languages Strategy

The objective of the Gateway Languages Strategy is to equip the global Church with the content, tools and training materials needed for translation of the Bible and creation of culturally-relevant, theologically-sound biblical resources in every language needed by the global Church. It does so by providing these resources under open licenses and then collaborating with Church networks worldwide to translate and adapt them into the ~50 Languages of Wider Communication that cover 100% of the global Church through patterns of multilingualism (the Gateway Languages).¹⁶ In this way, every element of the Church in each people group is provided

¹⁵ Note that there is a difference between a “majority language” and a Gateway Language. In some parts of the world, certain majority languages have high prestige, are spoken by many people, and have high missional value to the Church in that region. But the languages themselves are not considered Gateway Languages because they are not required for translation; the Church can translate from an existing Gateway Language and so another is not needed.

¹⁶ The assumption is not that all valuable biblical content originates in English, but that much valuable content exists in English (especially ex-

with essential biblical resources in a language that they understand and that they have the legal freedom to use for Bible translation and creation of other biblical resources in their own languages.

Centrality of the Church

The Gateway Languages Strategy is built on the premises that the Church is God’s means of accomplishing the task of making disciples of all people groups, and that an essential aspect of making disciples is providing them with the Bible and other biblical resources in their own languages. An important prerequisite for this strategy is the existence of members of the Church that desire the content and are ready, willing, and able to translate and adapt it for effective use. Until the Church exists in a people group, the strategy described here is not directly applicable to it, because the element of the Church that would be equipped by it does not yet exist. That said, the strategy effectively equips the most local expression of the Church (the so-called “Proximate Church”) to an unreached people group.¹⁷ It provides unrestricted, high-value biblical resources that may be useful to the Proximate Church for evangelism, church planting, and other missional objectives.

Theological building blocks

The intent of this strategy is not merely to permit translations of a resource into another language. More importantly, it is to strengthen and foster the spiritual formation of each element of the Church by providing solid theological “building blocks” with which they can create resources in their own language that contribute to the establishment of a contextualized, doctrinally-sound theology. To that end, the strategy seeks to provide what has been found to be the most useful content for the global Church—biblical content that is open-licensed and easily adapted for use in many cultures and Christian traditions.

Overcoming the two obstacles

The strategy recognizes that the obstacles of language use and legal permission hinder the Church from meeting their own needs for effective biblical resources. In order to overcome the language obstacle, the strategy seeks to identify the Gateway Languages and provide essential biblical resources in each one. In order to overcome the legal obstacle, it provides the biblical resources needed by the global Church under open licenses. By bridging both the language use and legal permission gaps, the Church in every people group will have equal access, whether they have 300,000,000 speakers of their language or three.

egetical resources and training in Bible translation) and can be made available to the entire global Church through this model. Increasingly, the best and most effective biblical content is being created by the Church in many different languages and cultural contexts. This content can be made available to other languages (including English) using this same model, with different origination and destination endpoints.

¹⁷ The “Proximate Church” (which overlaps to some extent with the concept of the “near-culture” missionaries, see Johnstone, *The Future of the Global Church*, 229) refers to an element of the global Church that is geographically, culturally, ethnically, and/or linguistically similar to an unreached people group and that has no historical barrier that prevents them from reaching the unreached people group with the Gospel through evangelism and church planting.

The process

Joining the Gateway Languages Strategy requires letting go of the right to control what others do with biblical content you have created.¹⁸ For those willing to do so, the process for making it available to the entire global Church is straightforward:

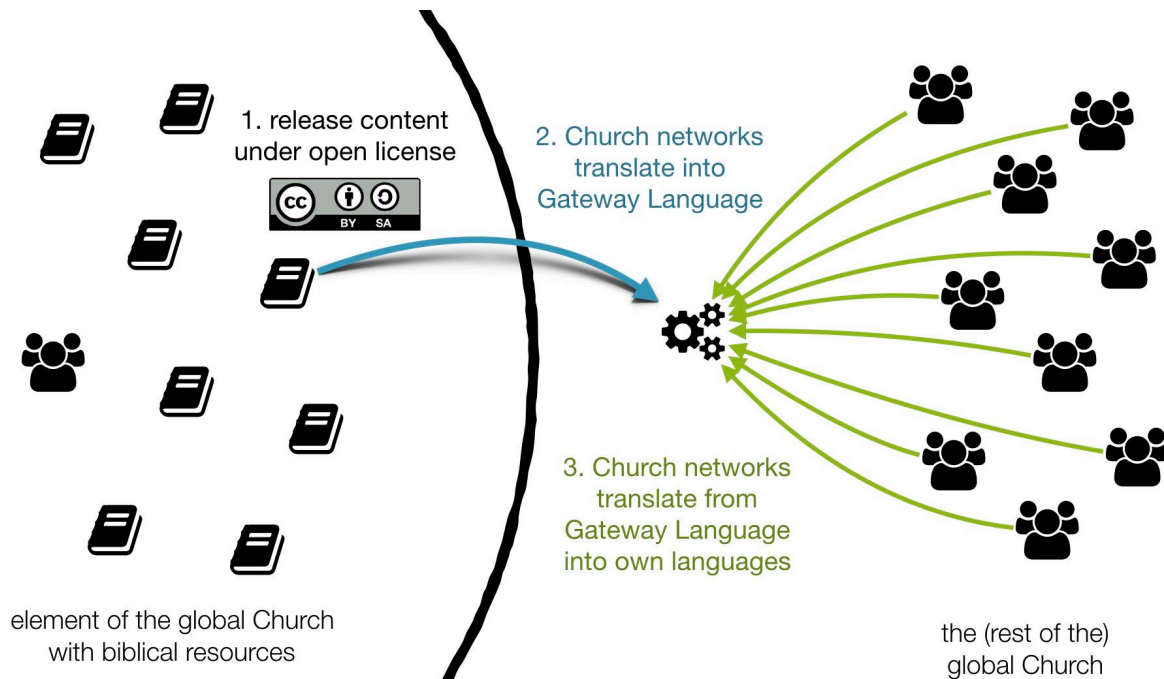


Diagram 5: The Gateway Language process

1. Release the content under an open license.¹⁹
2. Collaborate with Church networks (and others in the “free and open” movement) to translate the content into a Gateway Language.
3. Connect the Church that is bilingual in the Gateway Language to the content, as well as relevant tools and training.

Limitations of the strategy

It is important to recognize that the Gateway Languages Strategy merely describes a model for providing biblical resources to the entire global Church in every language by taking advantage of the new opportunities afforded by globalization and technology. It is not a substitute for training in translation principles and the

¹⁸ Many at this point erroneously conclude that this permits anyone to change the original content and that the subsequent blame (or shame) for the now corrupted content falls back on the original creator. This is an understandable fear, but it is based on an unfortunate misunderstanding of how open licenses work. The originals are not open for alteration; it is derivative works that are the focus. A person’s work—even work now in the public domain where there are no copyright restrictions at all—rises or falls on its own merit, not on what someone else does with it in a derivative work. The missiological and legal rationale for this strategy is discussed by the author in *The Christian Commons*.

¹⁹ Many licenses provide the freedom that the global Church needs, but the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 License (CC BY-SA) has been found by many to be optimal and is in use by the [unfoldingWord](http://unfoldingword.org) (unfoldingword.org) and [Door43](http://door43.org) (door43.org) projects. Note that not every Creative Commons license is an “open” license. For example, any license that includes “no derivative works” or “non-commercial use only” maintains restrictions that hinder the Church by governing their use of the content. Such licenses are thus inherently antithetical to the purpose of the strategy. In addition to the CC BY-SA license, the following content licenses are also compatible with this strategy: Public Domain/CC0, Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY).

building up of mature leadership in the Church. That said, it greatly extends the reach of biblical resources that may be useful to these important ends.

8. Strategic Transitions

The Gateway Languages Strategy reflects global shifts that are occurring and takes advantage of 21st century opportunities in order to maximize the scope and effectiveness of Bible translation. It is important to note that while these transitions make the strategy possible, the transitions themselves do not necessarily imply that the former models are deficient or that they will disappear completely.

From Restricted to Open

The goal of Elon Musk when he founded Tesla Motors was not to build an electric car company but to “accelerate the advent of sustainable transport.”²⁰ For the global transportation paradigm to shift, Musk realized that many automobile manufacturers would need to move in that direction together, but the restrictions on Tesla’s intellectual property hindered it. So Tesla open-sourced all their patents on electric vehicles so that anyone could use them without being sued for infringement. Amazingly, Tesla cares more that worldwide sustainable transportation come into existence than that their company be the one that brings it to pass.

Bible translation may be at a similar inflection point. Launching a global movement of excellence in Bible translation in every language can only happen if the entire Church has perpetual and unobstructed access to the very best biblical content, tools and training. This requires moving from a paradigm of legal restrictions and license management to one where biblical content is “locked open” so that the whole Church can work together in Bible translation without hindrance.

The Gateway Languages Strategy provides biblical content that is irrevocably open-licensed so that the entire global Church can use and build on it equally.

From Institutions to Networks

Until recently, Bible translation and distribution was often considered to be the responsibility of organizations established for these purposes. Today, the global Church is increasingly taking responsibility for meeting their own Bible translation and distribution needs collaboratively. As a result, hierarchical, centralized missional models are transitioning to networked, distributed ones. Formal, legally-established relationships between organizations at official levels are transitioning to informal, open collaboration of individuals and churches at the grassroots level.²¹ Around the world, the identity of contributors and the quality of their contribution to the work is beginning to matter more than merely credentials or affiliations. Consequently, as greater numbers of the global Church join in the work, Bible translation and distribution is becoming a massively parallel process.

The Gateway Languages Strategy is built, extended, and maintained by this dynamic, complex network of interconnected members of the global Church working in coordination toward the same objective of providing a trustworthy Bible translation in every language.

²⁰ Musk, “All Our Patent Are Belong To You.”

²¹ As Johnstone observes, this will require gracious and humble collaboration: “Increasingly, everyone will need to deal with multiple initiatives aimed at the same populations; agencies and networks will have to cooperate across cultures, and multicultural teams will become the norm. This is no longer an option, but essential.” *The Future of the Global Church*, 228.

From Pipeline to Platform

Traditional industries have been described as “pipelines” that create value by controlling a linear series of processes that take inputs at one end of the value chain and transform them into a product that is marketed to consumers using a “push” model at the other end.²² In the globalized, connected world, a new “platform” model is emerging (e.g., Uber, Airbnb, YouTube, Apple’s App Store, etc.) that empowers people by connecting networks, and providing what is needed for them to collaboratively engage in the value-creation process as both producers and consumers. The platform model is “a way of building something that is open, inclusive, and has a strategic focus.”²³

In traditional Bible translation models, organizations frequently focused on standardizing a “pipeline” and prescribing it as the only process by which the desired outcome could be verifiably achieved. This included carefully controlling tangible assets (e.g., exegetical resources, industry knowledge, translation technologies), managing the labor force, and prescribing the specific steps in the translation process in each individual language. As Bible translation transitions to a complex network, pipelines do not go away. Instead, there may be as many different pipelines as there are networks involved in Bible translation.²⁴ The focus in the emerging paradigm shifts from prescribing a standard pipeline (and then controlling resources and processes to enforce it), to empowering the global Bible translation community to create their own pipelines, each optimized for their own situations. An important part of this transition is providing the global Church with platforms (including the information, tools, and connections with others who can help) that enable them to engage in the work directly and achieve optimal results.

The Gateway Languages Strategy informs the design of platforms so as to freely provide what the global Bible translation ecosystem needs—in terms of content, tools, and training made available in the Gateway Languages—in order for the global Church to achieve excellence in Bible translation.

From Linear to Exponential

The human brain tends to struggle with grasping exponential patterns. For example, if you were to take thirty linear steps from the door of your home, you would end up about thirty meters away, but if you were to take thirty exponential steps from your door, you would end up a billion meters away, (effectively walking around the world twenty-six times).²⁵ Here’s another example: Due to our predisposition to think in linear terms, we expect the halfway point of a successful trajectory to be the point when 50% of the desired outcome has been accomplished. In exponential processes, 1% is halfway.²⁶

²² Choudary, Alstyne, and Parker, *Platform Revolution*.

²³ Wadhwa, “What Made These Amazing Companies So Disruptive?” An example of a pipeline in the software industry is Microsoft’s Office suite, as it is created by an organized, self-contained, tightly-managed entity that controls the inputs, the process, and the output—a software application. An example of a platform is the Apple App Store, as it provides an ecosystem that anyone can join, including a programming language(s), a software development environment, tutorials and documentation for new developers, and connectivity between producers and a community of consumers such that any developer can create and distribute their own application to their own customers within the network.

²⁴ Historically, the quality of a finished Bible translation in a minority language has often been assumed to be inferable from (or at least correlated to) the process used to create it. A product that was not produced according to the prescribed pipeline was intrinsically considered to be of dubious quality, due to the unknown (or unapproved) process by which it came into existence. The proliferation of pipelines suggests the need for a means of determining and affirming the quality of a translation that is not dependent on the process used to create it. One example of such a tool is translationCore (unfoldingword.org/tc).

²⁵ This example is borrowed from Diamandis in *Abundance*.

²⁶ If the initial output of an exponential system that doubles every generation is (negligibly, rounded to hundredths) 0.01% of the whole, then the progression is as follows: generation 1 produces 0.02%, 2 (0.03%), 3 (0.06%), 4 (0.13%), 5 (0.25%), 6 (0.5%), the 7th generation (1%) is the halfway point, 8 (2%), 9 (4%), 10 (8%), 11 (16%), 12 (32%), 13 (64%), and 100% is achieved by the 14th generation (128%).

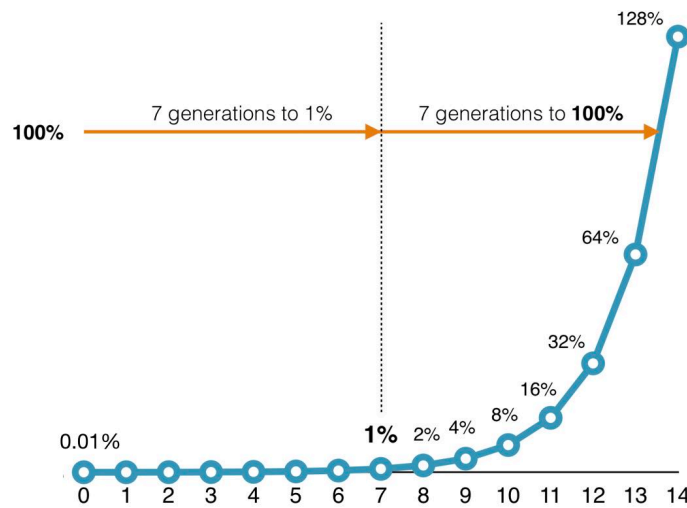


Diagram 6: 1% is halfway

Linear thinking may find it difficult to envision a world where every people group not only has a complete translation of the Bible in their language, but abundant biblical resources in multiple formats and in each dialect and cultural register spoken by the global Church. Attempts to scale up a linear pipeline to push a product outward to meet such a need will rapidly run into insurmountable obstacles. This is due to the fact that while linear models are often more productive in the early stages, they require enormous resources to maintain a trajectory that is able to accomplish the objective.

By contrast, exponential models produce very little in the early stages as the collective capacity of the network is being built. For the first ten generations of doubling, an exponential process looks suspiciously like a shallow linear process (which may confuse those who do not recognize it for what it is). But if the compounding pattern is sustained, when the process reaches the inflection point at later stages, it suddenly explodes and the objective is accomplished in a very short amount of time.

The initial stages of the Gateway Languages Strategy require significant time and capital, as it involves creating content, engineering new technologies, and translating all of it into the Gateway Languages. But the early stages of this process should not be confused with a shallow, linear growth pattern. Because the strategy is focused on equipping the massive potential workforce of the global Church using technological accelerators and enabling frictionless entry into the collaborative ecosystem, a fundamentally different type of progression is possible. In the exponential world, “the larger something is, the faster it grows even larger”.²⁷

If, in fact, the equipping of the global Church is more like a compounding, multiplicative process than a linear process (following the model described in 2 Timothy 2:2), then to the extent we use metrics from a linear paradigm to measure success in an exponential paradigm, we will encounter unavoidable confusion. This need for new metrics is especially true as service-providing para-church organizations transition from providing biblical resources through their own “pipelines” to creating “platforms” for the Church to create and share their own biblical resources.

²⁷ Scott-Morgan, *The Reality of Our Global Future*.

To illustrate, consider the building of railroads. A production metric might be “miles of track built” and it could be accelerated by adjusting the inputs and optimizing processes. This is a linear metric, however, and it assumes that the goal is to build miles of track. If the actual goal is instead recognized to be the connection of metropolitan areas *and equipping them to train their own communities to build their own railroads*, the metric by which success is determined has little to do with the miles of track laid and far more to do with “metropolitan regions connected and equipped.”

This requires a significant shift in perception, however, because the latter objective depends on a compounding process. Fewer miles of track will be laid at the outset because of the time and effort involved in equipping other railroad builders. But this arduous process creates massive capacity in the network itself and, once the tipping point is reached, the aggregate capacity of the fully-connected complex network becomes so vastly productive as to dwarf the imagination of even the most optimistic linear thinker.²⁸ In this railroad metaphor, the connected network of fully-equipped railroad builders can produce so many miles of track as to make counting the miles themselves all but irrelevant. If the network needs more track for any reason, anywhere, any time, anyone in the network can build it themselves.²⁹

To the extent that the biblical model for growth of “teaching teachers” (2 Timothy 2:2) is employed for training leaders to use the resources to create biblical content in their own languages and train others to do the same, the Gateway Languages Strategy makes exponential increases possible, both in terms of the number of languages with biblical content and the amount of content available in each.

9. Early Results

No one knows how far or how fast it traversed the earth, but anecdotes suggest that a 50-story text and multi-media resource called *Open Bible Stories* is being used by the global Church for effective ministry all over the world, in a variety of capacities.³⁰ From church-planting in the Middle East to new disciple training in Africa to Sunday School curriculum in Southeast Asia to evangelism in Asia, the Church is (legally) using this resource in whatever way they desire, and they do not need to ask permission from anyone to do so or report how they use it.

²⁸ The concept of a geometric progression reaching the “knee” of the trajectory and the immense impact that results is described by Barabasi and Frangos (*Linked*), Gladwell (*The Tipping Point*), and Ismail, et al. (*Exponential Organizations*).

²⁹ Gerner argues in “Why Worldwide Bible Translation Grows Exponentially” that Bible translation reached an inflection point in 1815 and is growing exponentially: “In the history of worldwide Bible Translation, the number of languages with Scriptures has doubled every 41 years. If current trends continue, then by 2026, 3,500 languages will have a portion of the Bible translated; by 2072 all 7,881 languages on earth will have Scriptures available,” (p. 21). A few observations concerning Gerner’s mathematical computation of the growth curve are worth mentioning: First, Gerner points out that this assumes the growth rate will continue at the current pace. The model does not take into account the problems that Bible translation agencies have experienced scaling up to the vastly higher numbers of languages with relatively few speakers. Second, it calculates availability of some Scripture, not the complete Bible. This is divergent from the expressed desire of Church leaders all over the world who almost universally desire the entire Bible in every language. Third, it assumes that the number of known languages is the number of potential translations needed. As we have seen above, this number is likely far below the actual need experienced by the global Church, when counting dialect, cultural variant, media needs, etc. Finally, Gerner observes that the exponential growth is self-replicating: “The process of Scripture translation has inherent exponential growth, not derived from anything that grows exponentially. It is self-replicating by virtue of the fact that translations are used to produce other translations,” (p. 9). This assumption seems to describe a multi-generational, sequential translation model where translations are derived from translations which are derived from translations, and so on. While this may occur to some extent, it would be helpful to see evidence showing this to be the case, as other patterns indicate that Church networks are translating from Languages of Wider Communication (i.e., Gateway Languages) in greater numbers. In this model, the rapid growth in Bible translations is the result of the vastly increasing numbers of Bible translators in the global Church working in parallel.

³⁰ Open Bible Stories was originally created by Distant Shores Media and the Door43 World Mission Community and is available online at openbiblestories.com.

The reason for this is because Open Bible Stories is available under an open license that enables the entire global Church to use it as though it belongs to them.³¹ After it was released under an open license, it was translated into the Gateway Languages by Church networks who saw the value it provided for evangelism and discipleship. From there, other Church networks have continued to translate it into their own languages, publishing the translations using print-on-demand systems, recording them in media formats, and distributing the translations from person-to-person, both online and offline.

The creators of Open Bible Stories knew that adopting this approach would not provide them with comprehensive analytics and numbers that would impress donors. But they also knew that making it “free and open” would enable the Church to collaborate together in order to accomplish the objective of rapidly providing effective biblical content in every language, even the last and the least.

The modern Bible translation movement is already transitioning to the Gateway Languages Strategy. The direction and momentum for this transition is largely coming from outside the West, as Church leaders in various regions of the world are choosing to set aside historical points of conflict with others in order to collaborate together to end the biblical famine of their people. In South Asia, for example, denominational leaders are graciously collaborating together to create unrestricted Bible translations in all of the Gateway Languages of the sub-continent, to serve all of them equally, as well as for use as source texts by translators who speak minority languages. Similar stories are beginning to emerge from other parts of the world as well, including Africa, South America, Eurasia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific.

10. The Adjacent Possible

It is difficult to imagine what the world was like before the wheel was invented. Human locomotion on land was limited to walking, running, or riding an animal. In this context, it would have been impossible to imagine (let alone build) a bicycle or car. This is because the bicycle and car were not yet adjacent possibilities—they were more than one innovation away. Because of this, they could not be conceived of before the invention of the wheel:

Before the invention of the wheel, the cart, the carriage, the automobile, the wheelbarrow, the roller skate, and a million other offshoots of circularity were not imaginable. They existed in a realm that was off-limits until the wheel was discovered, but once discovered, these pathways became clear. This is the adjacent possible. It’s the long list of first-order possibilities that open up whenever a new discovery is made.³²

The opening up of adjacent possibilities tends to happen most readily in open, collaborative contexts.³³ The process expands the realm of the possible in a non-linear manner, making it easy to underestimate the impact of the results and overestimate the time required for the outcome to be achieved.

For millennia, the majority of people groups of the world have existed in a near-total absence of biblical content in their own language. In this global and historical context of scarcity, it can be difficult to imagine a

³¹ The only freedoms that are not granted are not giving credit for someone else’s work and restricting others from enjoying the same freedom.

³² Diamandis and Kotler, *Abundance*.

³³ This is apparent in open-source software projects and open-access problem-solving platforms, where the free association of ideas and people with a broad range of skills and needs can innovate and problem solve together. Johnson explains why closed environments are less capable in this regard: “The problem with these closed environments is that they make it more difficult to explore the adjacent possible, because they reduce the overall network of minds that can potentially engage with a problem, and they reduce the unplanned collisions between ideas originating in different fields.” Johnson, “The Origins of Good Ideas.”

world characterized by abundance—where unlimited biblical resources in every language are not only possible but reality. Could it be that the global Church is emerging from its long history of extreme imbalance, where virtually all biblical resources are available only to a relatively small number of people, who happen to speak the right languages?

The adjacent possibilities of the exponentially expanding world in which the global Church now exists are immense, but to the extent that we are conditioned by a mindset that assumes scarcity and a continuation of the way things have always been, we may not see them. What if, in fact, we are rapidly approaching a world where the *norm* is abundant, theologically sound biblical resources in every language? What if it is not too far-fetched to envision every Bible translation being available not only in print but as interlinear, lexically-tagged study tools, interlinked to the original languages, complete with culturally-relevant study notes, lexicons, maps, and theological training resources, all available for free on mobile phones?

11. Conclusion

The global Church is expanding rapidly and the need for the Bible and other biblical resources is vast and changing constantly. At the same time, globalization continues to extend the worldwide reach of mobile technology and economic opportunities, resulting in a convergence of Languages of Wider Communication. This creates the context for a new paradigm of creation and translation of biblical content, one that does not focus on delivering a product but on empowering the network that is the global Church. By providing unrestricted biblical content, translation tools, and training resources in the Gateway Languages of the world, the entire global Church can collaborate together to meet the need for translation of the Bible and creation of relevant and sound theological resources in every language of the world.

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