

# Living Words

ISSUE  
NO. 16

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching,  
for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.



## Walking Backwards Into the Future

This 60th Anniversary special edition features stories from the past and a spotlight on our direction into the future.

As I write this introduction to the latest edition of *Living Words*, my heart is filled with thankfulness to God for His blessings and faithfulness to us as an organisation as we have celebrated 60 years of His goodness to us, just last month.

Throughout the month of September, we held 60th anniversary celebration events in Christchurch, Wellington, Featherston (where we were headquartered for 15 years), and Auckland. These were all well attended and provided lots of wonderful interaction as we remembered, reflected, reminisced, and rejoiced in God's favour to us as an organisation.

Our theme for our celebration events and also for this issue of *Living Words*, is, "Walking Backwards Into the Future". As we have been intentional in taking time to look back, God has also impressed upon us that we need to be looking forward into the future, and that future should be informed by our past.

There is a Māori proverb that beautifully illustrates this theme: "Ka mua, ka muri", expressing how the past, present and future are intertwined, and this is often cited as 'walking backwards into the future'. We need to always remember our history as we face the challenges that the future holds, and hold fast to the assurance of God's faithfulness, proven over the past 60 years.

So it is fitting that we adopt this same theme for this special issue of *Living Words* which is the last one for this year, and concludes our 60 years of ministry and service here in NZ for the global Bible translation movement. This issue will feature just a few of the stories from a special publication we have published for our 60th anniversary, entitled, "Our Stories Are HIStory".

The book is designed to be a 'coffee table' book that you can pick and read just one or two stories and be inspired, and then put down for another time.

We have divided the book into three sections as follows: 1) Impact of the Word, 2) Insights into Bible translation, and 3) Involved in His story. There are then a series of stories, with photos, from members over our 60 years, that illustrate the theme of the section.

I invite you to purchase one of these books for yourself or maybe more for friends and family. I know you won't be disappointed. We are offering these beautifully written and illustrated books at an affordable price of \$30, plus postage and handling. You can go to our website to purchase these or write to [admin@wycliffenz.org](mailto:admin@wycliffenz.org).

This issue also includes a book review on another Wycliffe NZ book published in time for our 60th anniversary celebrations, entitled "Songs on the Journey", written and compiled by our members, Robin and Delwyn McKenzie. This book is a very real and raw account of this family's journey, and all beautifully portrayed through a creative lens of story and song.

In this special issue we look back with much thankfulness, but we conclude by also looking forward through an interview with Bruce Eirena, who was recently appointed by the Board as our next Executive Director, commencing from January 1st, 2024.

So please read on and be inspired, join with us in giving thanks to God for His goodness and faithfulness, and be excited for what God is going to do through Wycliffe NZ in the next 60 years.

In His service together, for the global Bible translation movement,

**Robert Lovatt**  
Executive Director



# Celebrating 60 Years Through Stories

BY ALEX WINSLADE

*"I found that person's story really thought-provoking! My understanding of missions was so limited; I thought all missionaries had to be bold evangelists in remote parts of the world, but listening to that story opened my eyes. God can use people with so many different skill-sets in the missions world!"*

It was comments like this one that first began to draw my attention to the importance of telling stories. When I heard this in response to a story told by one of our members on the Story of Hope podcast, I started to realise the way sharing stories—testimonies really—of God at work in our life has real power to open people's eyes. But more than being revelatory and challenging, stories have a way of deeply moving and inspiring as well, which became evident to me when I had the privilege of sitting and listening to our Scripture Through the Arts presentations.

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## *It struck me that the Bible also places emphasis on sharing what God has done*

For this reason, when Rob Lovatt came to me with the idea for the production of a coffee table book to celebrate 60 years, I got excited. Sitting down to draft a project brief in December 2022, I came across Psalm 78:4, which reads

*“We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders” (NLT).*

It struck me that the Bible also places emphasis on sharing what God has done, so that others may know His power and that we may bring glory to Him.

The motivation to share stories deepened further when my excitement and conviction was met with challenge: though I was sure there would be hundreds of impactful stories carried by Wycliffe NZ members of the past 60 years, actually *finding* them was much more difficult. I soon learned that most of these stories are only found through conversation with those who hold the experiences, or in drawer upon drawer of archived newsletters. But I was determined to see even a small portion of these stories impact others as they had me.

The book had its title from the get-go, “Our Stories Are HIStory”, representing its two-fold purpose: to (1) capture some of the history of Wycliffe NZ while (2) bringing glory to God who weaves together the many individual experiences as part of his wider work in the world.

The subtitle, however, “illustrating how small things have great impact in God’s story” was one of the last things completed on the whole project. As stories and story-leads started pouring in, I needed a way to organise them in order to be presented in a cohesive manner throughout the book. We eventually landed on three main themes, which have

become the three main sections of the book. First, “Impact of the Word” contains stories of Scripture that is translated into the heart language having impact on lives and communities. Second, “Insights Into Bible Translation” contains snippets into the lives and work of New Zealanders who have served in Bible translation over the past 60 years. Third, “Involved in His Story” collates stories showing the broader perspective of God’s hand amidst and across all the details.

It only became clear to me once these sections were established and filled with stories that each theme reflected, in its own way, the idea of small things having great impact:

1. **Impact of the Word** showed how something as seemingly small as a word, phrase or verse of Scripture has life-transforming effects in the heart language
2. **Insights into Bible Translation** revealed the nature of Bible translation work as focusing on small details that have significant effects on meaning; as well as consisting of small, slow steps which often only yield fruit down the line.
3. **Involved in His Story** created a glimpse of how we all play a small part in the wider narrative of God’s work in the world; whether individual lives in light of the bigger mission, or small steps of obedience used to accomplish His great purposes.

**From the 46 stories contained in *Our Stories Are HIStory*, we have selected one from each section to share with you in this edition of *Living Words*.** It is my prayer that just as I have been moved, inspired and challenged by the stories of our members, God will use them to reveal his heart, character and purpose to all who have access to these stories now.

● Scan to purchase a copy of *Our Stories Are HIStory*. Or visit [wycliffenz.org/our-store](https://wycliffenz.org/our-store)



# At Last, the Stories Make Sense!

BY JOHN RENTZ

Most of our first term at Reef Islands was spent learning the language and customs of the people. In order for us to help translate the Scriptures into Äiwoo, the local language spoken only at Reef Islands, we first had to learn the language ourselves. Having no written tradition, the only way for us to learn Äiwoo was through listening to the people as they spoke, transcribing their speech in phonetic script, and eventually starting to devise an alphabet.

During our second term we began to focus on translation, but the slow and meticulous pace of work remained the same. Before a translation could be published, it had to pass through a number of checks. The national translator produces a rough draft, with a bit of guidance from the advisor (someone like me who is trained in biblical exegesis); then the advisor checks the translation and recommends revisions where the translation is inaccurate. The revised translation is then checked by a consultant to ensure that it is accurate. This person usually has previous experience translating the Scriptures in related languages, so they know what kinds of problems to expect.

Prior to publication, the translation must be read by a group of local speakers who have not been involved in the translation process. They must decide if the translation is clear and natural. Those parts of the translation which are not clear must be revised.

We struggled to find people who could serve as reviewers. Because none of the local people had ever seen their language in written form, they were unable to recognise any of the words. To make matters worse, Äiwoo words can be very long because they frequently have multiple prefixes and suffixes added to the root word. Oftentimes a whole sentence can be included in one word (for example, *Lupopâdomanadu-unetowâ*, meaning, “They were all very truly amazed”).

However, we did find one person in our village who was willing to persevere in the difficult task of reading the translation manuscripts and providing us with feedback regarding its clarity and naturalness. His name was Thomas Teikâ. Thomas had only two or three years of schooling; that was not atypical for people his age at Reefs. But Thomas would prod through those translation manuscripts, sounding out the words syllable by syllable, until he could understand the meaning of a complete sentence.

One afternoon I passed on to Thomas a couple of chapters of Matthew’s Gospel. We had just finished translating those chapters and I printed them out on our printer. (Though we had no electricity on the island, we were able to power my laptop computer and printer with a solar panel and 12V battery). I was surprised when Thomas returned the chapters to me early the following morning; he had carefully marked all the places where the translation needed revision. I knew that it would have taken him at least ten hours to complete this amount of work. Startled, I asked Thomas, “When did you do all this work?”

“I stayed up all night,” was his reply. I explained to him that it wasn’t necessary to do that. The work could easily have waited till the following week. Thomas smiled and said to me, “You don’t



Image: Thomas Teikâ

understand. I’ve heard these stories all my life and never understood them. Now, for the first time, the stories make sense to me.”

Translation work often moves at a very slow pace, and there were times I felt unappreciated. At those times I tried to remember Thomas. Knowing that there was at least one soul out there who was anxiously awaiting the translated Word was enough to keep me going.

In 2004, after the dedication of the Äiwoo translation of Mark’s Gospel, we conducted a reading tour of all the villages at Reefs. During that tour, where people packed the *singol haus* in village after village, God showed me beyond any doubt that there were ‘Thomases’ in every village—people who would sit for hours to hear God’s Word in their own language.

# Translation Trickiness: ‘Sheol’

BY JONAH ADAMS

You know the feeling you get sometimes when searching for the right expression, but no matter how hard you try, you can’t find the words to completely capture what you want to say? When working on a translation, the drafting process can feel like this. We often find ourselves needing to revise certain key terms in hopes of finding the right word. And this is done with a limited vocabulary!

Key terms are words that carry an important idea that is central to understanding a text. One such word we came across was the Hebrew word for the spiritual realm of the dead: Sheol. Jonah says that he cries from the “belly of Sheol”, comparing the belly of the fish to the realm of the dead. When translating this term, we faced two challenges. First, we lacked a word for “the realm of the dead.” Second, while Jonah was actually in the belly of a fish, he was not actually in the realm of the dead. We want to avoid this misunderstanding.

To solve the first problem, we tried the expression “place of the dead.” But later, we realised this referred only to a physical place like a graveyard. This would not work! Eventually, after contacting older locals and spiritual leaders among the people group, we discovered that there is a word in the language for the spiritual realm of the dead. We decided to use that word, Nwuh. However, there were still two potential problems: this word is a bit unfamiliar to our audience, and we also had to show that Jonah was not

actually in the realm of the dead. So, we dropped a hint that Jonah was “as though dead.” This shows both that Nwuh is where the dead are and that Jonah in his poetic language was “like dead” instead of actually dead. It now sounds like this: “I cried for help from Nwuh, as though dead.”

We initially tried keeping “belly” in the translation but found it difficult in community testing. It was interpreted literally and sounded very odd to readers, as though there is a literal stomach in the realm of the dead! We have often seen that other concrete words don’t work with abstract concepts in this language. Metaphors can be more readily understood if they are commonly used, but if not, they can cause unnecessary confusion. For now, we have moved the word “belly” to a footnote to avoid such confusion.

These decisions around what extent we can render words literally are made in every translation, including English. For example, no English translation talks about Jesus’ bowels in Mark 1:41, even though the Greek expression for being moved with compassion used the metaphor of being moved to one’s bowels, as the bowels were thought to be the seat of tender affections. This is the kind of issue that translators come across while trying to be as faithful to the text as we can. Please continue to pray for the work of Bible translation!

# Meeting Tawan

BY GREG BLOK



Image: Tawan on that day

## DECEMBER 2012

The other day we were at Dawn's house trying to work out the vowels of the Lawa language. Dawn is the first Christian we have met in the Lawa people after living up here for over a year. She has a wild testimony of coming to Jesus out of demon possession, because no one else could help her get free. Her family tried other witch doctors, Buddhist monks and even the psychiatric hospital in Chiang Mai. None of them helped. But then one day, Dawn's daughter happened to meet a Christian who invited her to church and with the help of the pastor, and the powerful name of Jesus, they got Dawn freed from the demons.

Anyway, we were working with Dawn on the vowels in Lawa, which are a slippery lot and didn't want to align themselves into Thai or English norms. To give you a taste of what I mean, New Zealand English has three back vowels – 'u' 'o' and 'ɔ'. The difference between 'o' and 'ɔ' being the difference between the words, 'doe' and 'door' or 'low' and 'law'. Thai also has three back vowels and they are close to the English equivalents which makes things easy. Eastern Lawa however, has four back vowels instead of three.

We got to lunch time and took a break to eat outside, where it was a little cooler. We were eating rice and some spicy food that Dawn had made for us when we saw a Lawa man drive past on his motorbike. He turned to look at us, which is not unusual. We are the only Europeans for fifty kilometres or more, and everybody stares at us every time we are out in public. He did a U-turn and drove back to where we were eating our lunch. That was slightly unusual. We weren't sure what to expect from him. He introduced himself to us as Tawan and we introduced ourselves to him.

Then he said, "I'm a Christian and I'd like to plant a church in my village and translate the Bible into my language. Can you help me?"

Wow. Can you believe that?

To get to this conversation it had taken us nearly seventeen years. God had called us into Bible Translation in 1997 and, after a long and winding road to get ourselves ready, we had flown to Thailand in January 2008. There we started learning Thai and enrolled in the Translation and Linguistics training program at Payap University in Chiang Mai. In 2012 we moved up to live with the Eastern Lawa people and started learning their language. We met Tawan in December 2012. He had just been in prison for nearly 17 years, where he met Jesus! Is that a coincidence?

We had often wondered how long it would take us to find or train someone who was capable of helping us with the Bible translation. But here, in the space of one sentence, God had shown us that He had been working in this people group long before we ever got there. It turned out Tawan had finished a theological degree by correspondence while in prison, and was now working on his masters degree. He was the perfect person for translation as he could speak both Thai and Eastern Lawa. He is now our main translator.

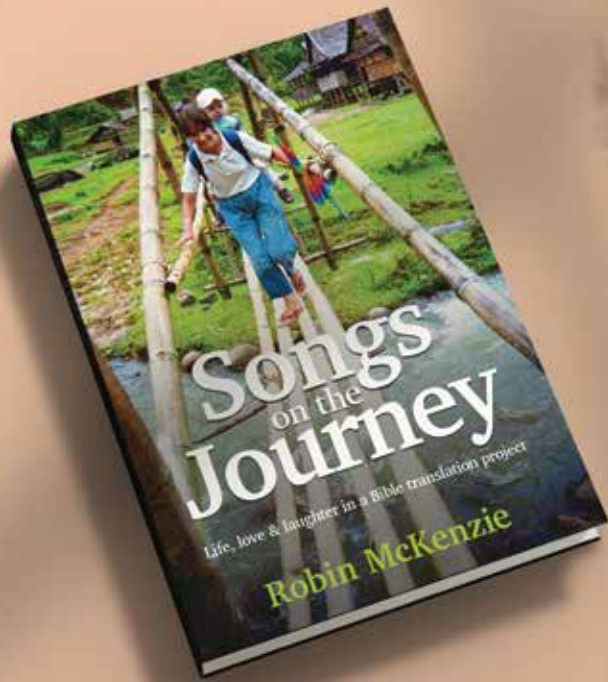


Image is a mockup of the product

## Songs on the Journey

“Life, love and laughter in a Bible translation project” is the sub-title of this book. All your emotions are touched as you read through the pages and absorb their very real experiences of living cross-culturally in a very out-of-the-way remote area and of setting out to learn the Tabulahan language of South East Asia. All this in obedience to God’s call on their lives to translate the Bible for a people group who didn’t have God’s Word in their own language.

Robin’s down to earth writing style takes you into their lives, which is aided by the inclusion of excerpts from Delwyn’s journals. The struggles are real, but so is their dependance on God who is ever faithful. Robin skillfully incorporates the process of language learning in a language as yet unwritten and then moving on to Bible translation.

Delwyn, a musician and songwriter, learns the traditional Tabulahan music style. As Scripture is translated, she puts it to music which this people group take to heart and sing. God’s Word takes root in their lives.

Can you imagine days of difficult travel by 4-wheel drive, then with horses (if available), and walking with young children and their supplies, to reach your destination? And with rain and swollen rivers to navigate as well. Then turning around after several months in the village only to repeat the journey again on the way out. God answers many prayers along the way. They stay overnight with strangers who become very close and loved friends. Relationships are built with these amazing and generous people. Language learning and analysis of the language progresses and then Bible translation begins.

But not all is smooth. A change in policy by the Government means they, along with other folk working in other language projects, have to leave the country of Indonesia. How will they be able to continue their work? A move to the Philippines opens up which means setting up again in a new country. Is there a possibility to have Tabulahan people go to the Philippines to continue working with them? Again, God provides the right people to go and work on translation continues.

Relationships are ever strengthened and deepened as the work continues. Each trip back into the Tabulahan village brings celebrations and losses; the joy of new babies, the sadness of those who died, and the excitement of new people to return with them to continue the translation work.

This is a story of strong commitment, inspiration, God’s faithfulness and the sheer grit and determination of a family called by God. It’s a story of what God does in a people group who for the first time have God’s Word in their own language and whose lives are changed forever. Robin and Delwyn along with their children would not say they are spiritual giants, but just ordinary people following God’s call on their lives. God is honoured and glorified.

You will be blessed in reading this book; I highly recommend it to you.

● Scan to purchase a copy of **Songs on the Journey**, or visit [wycliffenz.org/our-store](http://wycliffenz.org/our-store) – available in hardcopy and as an e-publication.





# Moving Forward

**Introducing Wycliffe NZ's  
next Executive Director!**



This edition has recapped a lot of the “walking backwards” we have done this year, in highlighting and celebrating what God has done in the past. But while we have been looking back, we have also been steadily moving forward as an organisation.

One large change happening as we move into the future is the recent appointment of Wycliffe NZ's next Executive Director, Bruce Eirena.

Bruce and Jenny Eirena joined Wycliffe NZ in 2014, first serving in Papua New Guinea where Bruce was Regional Director for the Northeast Region of SIL PNG and Jenny taught at Ukarumpa International School. Since returning to New Zealand in early 2020, Bruce has served in various roles with the home office and Jenny has started Wycliffe NZ's new performing arts initiative, Scripture Through the Arts.

As we look to the future, we took the opportunity to interview Bruce as he prepares to take on this role, and how he sees himself ‘walking backwards into the future’.

### **Why are you passionate about the mission of Bible translation?**

**Bruce:** ‘Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so...’. This simple Sunday School song lyric has stuck with me throughout my life. I want people to know and experience God’s truth and love, just like I do.

In Scripture we discover Jesus, find God’s truth, find and grow our faith, learn to live well together in the present, and understand the hope we have for life eternal. Most of you reading this are probably like me, in that we take it for granted that we can read Scripture in our own language. I’ve interacted with enough people without this privilege, and who have experienced it for the first time, to know the difference it makes to a person to have God’s Word in their mother tongue.

I like what Cameron Townsend, our movement’s founder said, “The greatest missionary is the Bible in the mother tongue. It needs no furlough and is never considered a foreigner.”

### **What excites you about stepping into this role?**

**Bruce:** There are several things I’m excited about as I step into this new role. I’m excited to be leading an organisation that is all about honouring God and sharing His Word. I look forward to supporting our members in the Bible translation movement around the world and I’m going to enjoy continuing work with our excellent home-office team. I am also looking forward to more opportunities to share our vision with churches, individuals and organisations. The world around us has changed dramatically over the 60 years of Wycliffe NZ and I’m excited to help us to serve our mission well in our current context.

### **How have past experiences (yours or others) informed your thinking for the future of the Bible translation movement?**

**Bruce:** Discuss missiology (a theology of mission) with anyone today and a common theme is likely to be ‘change’. In regard to our movement, one central point of change involves increases in local capacity for Bible translation, Biblical teaching and literacy work in churches and people groups around the world. I saw this in Papua New Guinea when we served there with SIL and I hear it as I talk to leaders from our movement and other Christian organisations from many different countries and cultures. This is an exciting change and one that we should celebrate.

A good challenge for us in Wycliffe NZ is how to best engage in God’s mission in this new context. I believe we need to be training the people we send out so that they are well prepared for this context, and to also consider increasing our partnerships with local initiatives through financing, remote expertise and other means.

### **What do you hope will characterise Wycliffe NZ at the end of your 4-year term as Director?**

**Bruce:** I hope to continue to see a vibrant organisation with a strong passion for God’s Word working together, encouraging and supporting one another as we send people throughout the world to work with others in the body of Christ to make the Word of God available to all people in their mother tongue.

It is my hope that we will be characterised by strong partnerships and that we, as an organisation, will have a generous Spirit towards one-another and others. I also want us to always be receptive to God’s leading and purposeful in putting it into action.

# We believe in universal access to God's Word

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