

# Wycliffe Bible Translators: Not Telling the Whole Story

**How a North American mission has stirred controversy throughout Latin America**

By David Stoll

■ The death of William Cameron Townsend last April was a reminder that if Bible translation is thriving like never before, his Wycliffe Bible Translators is not. Particularly since the 1981 murder of translator Chet Bitterman, finding recruits has not been the problem. The reception they will get, especially in Latin America, is.

A martyr's crop of volunteers, like a growing number of existing Wycliffe personnel, may soon find themselves back home again. Consider what this evangelical mission agency has faced since it fled South Vietnam and Cambodia in 1975:

- A president of Colombia pledged to nationalize it (although he didn't).
  - A prime minister of Peru ordered it to turn over its facilities (although Wycliffe ended up with a new ten-year government contract).
  - The government of Nigeria ordered Wycliffe replaced by Nigerian citizens (although a few staff members were allowed to stay as consultants).
  - The government of Nepal expelled the group for violating laws against evangelism.
  - The Brazilian government banned Wycliffe from Indian reserves.
  - The Mexican government revoked the group's contract and refused to renew visas.
  - The Inter-American Indigenist Institute, which has endorsed Wycliffe since 1940, voted to investigate it. This dependency of the Organization of American States also voted to strip Cameron Townsend of a 1972 award.
  - The Ecuadorian government revoked the group's contract (although it is allowing four translation teams to continue working).
  - The Panamanian government expelled Wycliffe on six days' notice.
- Some of the accusations against Wycliffe, such as drug trafficking and secret uranium mining, are so improbable that they seem to prove its innocence. Throughout these troubles, prominent evangelicals have continued to uphold Wycliffe—one of the world's largest mission agencies—as a model of cultural sensitivity, social concern, and diplomatic acumen.<sup>1</sup> Anthropological criticism of

its work is attributed to a long-standing professional bias against missionaries. As for the more political attacks, the group's technology and government ties are said to make it a scapegoat in an increasingly nationalist climate.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the U.S. Center for World Mission believes that accusations of complicity with ethnocide and the CIA are a propaganda ploy to feed blind rage against Christian missionaries.<sup>3</sup> Off the record, some Wycliffe members suspect an international conspiracy to prevent Indians from hearing the message of salvation.

From time to time, however, the policies of Wycliffe founder Cameron Townsend have troubled other Christians. If these unusual policies are responsible for Wycliffe's spectacular success, they may also have something to do with its present predicament. Is it wise, for example, for a faith mission to operate under long-term government contract, as Wycliffe does wherever possible? Is it ethical to obtain these contracts under the aegis of a "sister organization," the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), whose membership is identical to Wycliffe's but which presents itself in a very different light? And has the group's "two thousand tongues to go!" spirit turned Bible translation into an American invasion?

Now that every few months seems to bring a new crisis, a review of how Wycliffe has used Romans 13:1, 1 Corinthians 9:22, and the Great Commission seems overdue. At issue is a long tradition in missions, one of maximizing opportunities by going to the field in secular guise and serving the powers that be—from the hated East India Company of Robert Morrison's China to the police states of today.

■ In the early years, Wycliffe explained that it was overcoming two major barriers facing evangelical foreign missions. One was the barrier of language. The other was the "closed door" or "political exclusion."<sup>4</sup> If mastering native languages overcame the first barrier, then entering countries as linguists, preferably under government contract, would overcome the second. Members, therefore, went to the field not as missionaries of Wycliffe Bible Translators but as scientific investigators of the Wycliffe-related Summer Institute of Linguistics. And to protect its government ties, this group—which presented itself

as an evangelical faith mission at home—denied that it was a religious mission in the field.<sup>5</sup> From the origin of this scheme in the anticlerical Mexico of the 1930s, knowledgeable Christians accused its architect, Cameron Townsend, of dishonesty. Townsend's own followers objected to his strictures against overt evangelism. Neither did they appreciate his pursuit of left-wing political patrons, notably Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas.<sup>6</sup> To prevent members from disrupting such courtships, Townsend made "obey the government, for God is the one who has put it there" a cornerstone of Wycliffe policy. Members were never to criticize host governments in public.<sup>7</sup>

In 1953, Catholic pressure in Peru moved Townsend to deny not just that his Summer Institute of Linguistics was a religious mission but that it was related to Wycliffe.<sup>8</sup> As word of his claims filtered home, supporters began to wonder what they were supporting. Was not the distinction between the two organizations deceptive? Why not have one organization? Finally, some evangelicals objected to SIL's provision of flight service to Catholic clergy. (Such service was necessitated by the fact that to defend his group against the same Catholic clergy, Townsend had made his air arm, the Jungle Aviation and Radio Service, a dependency of various government ministries and the Peruvian Air

1. For a dissenting note, see Philip Harnden, "Today's Wycliffe Version," *The Other Side*, May 1977, pp. 24-34, 47-48.

2. See, for example, Philip Yancey, "Wycliffe: A Mission in Search of a Future," *Christianity Today*, February 19, 1982, pp. 20-25.

3. See Don Richardson, "Who Really Killed Chet Bitterman?" *Mission Frontiers*, April 1981, pp. 2-4-7.

4. Cameron Townsend, "Overcoming Barriers to Reach Bibleless Tribes," *Sunday School Times*, January 24, 1948, pp. 67-68, January 31, 1948, pp. 87-88, February 7, pp. 108-109; and "Barriers and Beyond," *Translation*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1944): p. 13.

5. "Our inspiration and motivation are invariably Christian," SIL-Colombia branch director Forrest Zander wrote to an interior ministry official on May 9, 1972. "Nevertheless, we are not a religious mission, that is, we do not represent or propagate any particular Christian church or denomination. Therefore we are not a 'catechizing' or 'proselytizing' organization. In the twenty-three nations where SIL works, not one baptism, one congregation, one pastor or priest exists by SIL's initiative." A similar argument was used by SIL-Mexico branch director John Alsop in "No Despreciamos al Indígena," *Proceso*, October 1, 1979, pp. 6-11. Alsop wrote, "If all members of a family are students, this does not mean that their home is a school. Even though all SIL members base their convictions on the Bible, this does not make them an organized church or religious group. . . . SIL refuses to accept the connotation of 'missionary' in the confessional and institutional sense in which the press . . . uses the term." SIL reasons that, since the translated Word of God rather

Force.) Challenged on all of this by other faith missions, Wycliffe resigned from the Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association in 1959.

"Their main defense," Townsend wrote of his methods, "is that they have worked."<sup>9</sup> To followers dissatisfied with equations between expediency and godliness, he argued that subterfuge was scriptural. "The Lord himself set the example of not telling his enemies the whole story," Townsend maintained. "Even his friends had to come to a realization of who he was. . . . We don't have to tell everyone all we know in order to be honest."<sup>10</sup> After all, had not Jesus come out of Nazareth "disguised very effectively" as a carpenter?<sup>11</sup> If Jesus had come into the world disguised as a carpenter, then Wycliffe missionaries could go to the field disguised as linguists.

■ Townsend's methods proved themselves according to that most esteemed of North American standards: they worked. In terms of fields entered, members, and new churches among the unreached, Wycliffe grew rapidly.

By presenting itself as a linguistic institute and offering to serve official policy, a faith mission obtained government charters to pursue its religious objectives in hundreds of languages. By the time a supposedly nonsectarian, nonecclesiastical language institute began to produce evangelical churches in each language it studied, appreciative regimes would support it against the formidable antagonisms it had stirred. Evangelical critics fell silent. When their objections must be recalled today, it is customary to focus on opposition to transporting Catholic clergy, thereby demonstrating that Townsend was more

than its members is responsible for any spiritual results, it can claim to be something other than a religious mission.

6. For more on the opposition to Townsend's policies, see "Wycliffe Translators: A Controversial Success," *Christianity Today*, October 27, 1967, pp. 41-42; and James and Marti Hefley, *Uncle Cam* (Waco: Word Books, 1974).

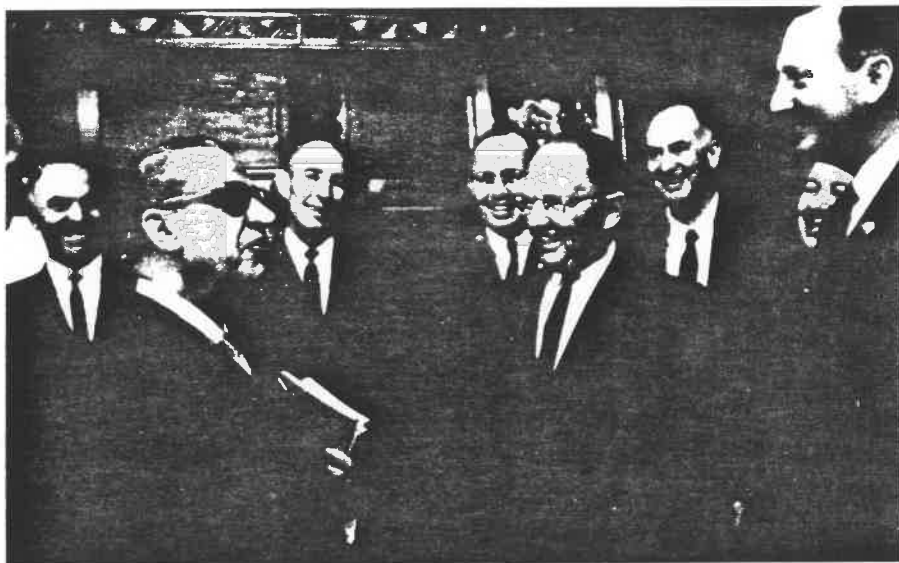
7. Cameron Townsend and Richard Pittman, *Remember All the Way* (Huntington Beach: Wycliffe Bible Translators, 1975), p. 103.

8. "We do not carry out evangelist work because the Institute has a mission of scientific character and not a religious end," Townsend was quoted. "On the other hand," reported the interviewer, "Dr. Townsend admitted that personally he is part of 'Wycliffe Bible' but advised that the Institute had nothing to do with it" (Jorge Donayre, "El Instituto Lingüístico de Verano Difundiría en la Selva El Credo Protestante," *La Prensa [Lima]*, August 8, 1953, pp. 1,3). The group's previous presentations in Peru (see, for example, the *Peruvian Times* of Lima, 1946-1953) as well as statements following Townsend's claim (see *La Prensa*, August 9-23, 1953, and *El Comercio [Lima]*, August 19, 1953) indicate that he was quoted correctly.

9. Townsend, *Sunday School Times* (1948).

10. Cameron Townsend, "Notes on Spiritual Work for WBT Field Workers," *Mexican Branch Handbook* (1956), pp. 84-88.

11. Cameron Townsend and Richard Pittman, *Remember All the Way* (1975).



"Uncle Cam" Townsend often dealt with both host government officials and peasants



Christian than his opponents.

But the cost of Wycliffe's subterfuges was high. The more successfully it pursued its evangelical goals, the more deceptive it proved itself to have been. How would Wycliffe's Baptist supporters react, for instance, if the Jesuits set up a secular front, incorporated it into a state university system, and used it to infiltrate the public schools with Catholic catechists seeking converts in each class they taught? If the analogy seems far-fetched, in Peru the Summer Institute expected similar results from the Indian teachers it supervised under government sponsorship.<sup>12</sup>

Besides undermining the group's credibility, Townsend's policies also isolated it from national churches and turned it into a hostage of host governments. SIL made itself accountable to political regimes rather than national Christians. It might not even be able to explain the religious side of its work without endangering that work! Instead of enlisting local citizens in the Great Commission, SIL contented itself with carrying out government policies. And in the 1970s, when other missionaries and social scientists began criticizing repressive government policies, SIL kept its mouth shut. Given its existing contracts, it felt it had no choice. Governments, in turn, learned to prefer conformist foreigners to dissenting citizens—an honor not likely to breed popularity.

Finally, Wycliffe made itself a prisoner of its own home supporters. To ward off charges of unethical conduct, it inflated their expectations of what Bible translation could accomplish. Information from the field was censored. It seems to have taken Wycliffe twenty years, for example, to inform home supporters that its

missionaries were operating in the field as Summer Institute linguists.<sup>13</sup> Now members may confide that their hands are tied because home supporters—far from familiar with the problems Wycliffe faces in the field—will not understand the reason for some badly needed change.

■ The Wycliffe vision began in 1917 when a young Bible salesman named Cameron Townsend had the good luck to meet some of the first Mayan Indian Protestants in Guatemala. It was not hard for him to see why, even before foreign missionaries reached their towns, these highland peasant farmers were groping toward a new religious order. Due partly to their folk Catholic traditions, many Indians were being driven into virtual slavery.

Townsend found himself in an awkward position, however. The same regime promoting Protestantism as an anti-Catholic measure was responsible for the increasing exploitation of Indians. The plantation owners who welcomed Townsend's religious services also resorted to liquor-plying "slave catchers" to snare Indians for their growing estates.

Townsend's Mayan Protestants wanted freedom from oppression. But his upper-class patrons needed more labor. The gospel could save not only the Maya but their masters, Townsend decided. Since abandoning vice and superstition would make Indians better workers, he reasoned; the planters would replace debt peonage with wages. The Maya would become free, and both groups would enjoy the fruits of progress. Advertising Mayan Protestants as model employees, Townsend

won the favorable attention of at least three presidents of the republic.

The Scripture of the first Mayan Protestants was in Spanish. Bilingual literates served as "interpreters" for their monolingual kin. However, the interpreters frequently failed to satisfy the missionaries who, for the first time, were peering over their shoulders. The more effective language of evangelism remained Maya.

Townsend also observed that *ladino* (non-Indian) pastors paternalized Indian believers. If *ladino* was to Indian as white was to black in the southern United States, then each group would have to come to the Lord in its own way. To explain the gospel and supervise its new adherents, he would have to learn the local language and translate the Bible into it.

First in the language of pragmatism, later in the language of revelation, Townsend and a few colleagues identified ethnic boundaries as the rock upon which they would build their church. *Ladino* racism against the Maya was giving North American missionaries an opening for their work. Interposing themselves

12. "Remember this is a government program and teachers cannot be judged on their religion," a SIL-Peru linguist told two interviewers in 1969 (James and Mari Hefley, *Dawn Over Amazonia* [Waco: Word Books, 1972]). "I can tell you this," the linguist continued. "All those who weren't believers when they entered have since accepted Christ. A few were evangelicals when they started. Fernando, the supervisor, was and still is a lay minister. We attend his church. Another lay preacher who came into the program had been stoned when he tried to preach in a certain village. He went back to this same place as a bilingual teacher and won thirty-five people to the Lord. The program is only three years old, and already we know of believers in over ten villages." According to two of the program's members, interviewed by David Stoll in 1977, many of the forty or so teachers who converted to

between the two groups, they decided that the Indians should have their own churches.<sup>14</sup>

As myth enveloped history, a belated, not entirely intelligible (or even much read) New Testament was held responsible for Cakchiquel Maya Protestantism. It was used to sanctify a linguistic, separatist approach to evangelism and to argue that every indigenous group in the world needed the same.

■ With their linguistic approach, Townsend and several generations of evangelical missionaries took advantage of internal colonialism to further their work. By serving official integration plans, yet siding with native people against petty exploiters, North American evangelicals took up an influential position between colonizer and colonized. For native people reeling from the impact of world market expansion, evangelical religion promised access to the white world's power—and protection from its destructive force. Equations between the power of antibiotics, prayer, literacy, and God's Word appealed to people comprehending tribulation and technology in spiritual terms.

The most consistent opponent of evangelical expansion was the traditional arm of Latin American governments among Indians, the Roman Catholic missions. It was their heavy-handed, hacienda-style Hispanicizing regime which conferred such a progressive air on North American evangelicals. With his Bible translations, Townsend revived the linguistic approach which Catholic missions had used for centuries. And with his contracts, Townsend led the assault on Catholic prerogatives by undermining earlier church-state agreements.

While the Catholics still insisted on a certain autonomy from state control, SIL did everything it could to present itself as Caesar's loyal servant. Indigenists organizing Indian affairs bureaucracies welcomed its services, as did military officers and investors. Not only could they use the institute to teach mission bishops a lesson, but these airborne linguists were a more efficient agent for official plans. While Catholic missionaries were still paddling to their posts, their North American rivals could wing in and

out in a few hours, and maybe deliver the nearest army payroll, too.

By working through the local language and promoting local leadership, SIL was also more likely to orchestrate Indians to official satisfaction. In the Amazon jungle, this meant concentrating dispersed tribal Indians around bilingual schools. Among highland farmers, it meant channeling social unrest into crusades against alcoholism, witchcraft, and illiteracy.

■ In some regions, SIL and other evangelical groups replaced the Catholic missions as the principal arm of government among native people. However, the evangelicals had been welcomed only as a temporary check on Catholic pretensions. Official national agencies were to take charge as soon as they were able. And as Latin American countries produced their own linguists and anthropologists, the rationale for SIL slipped away.

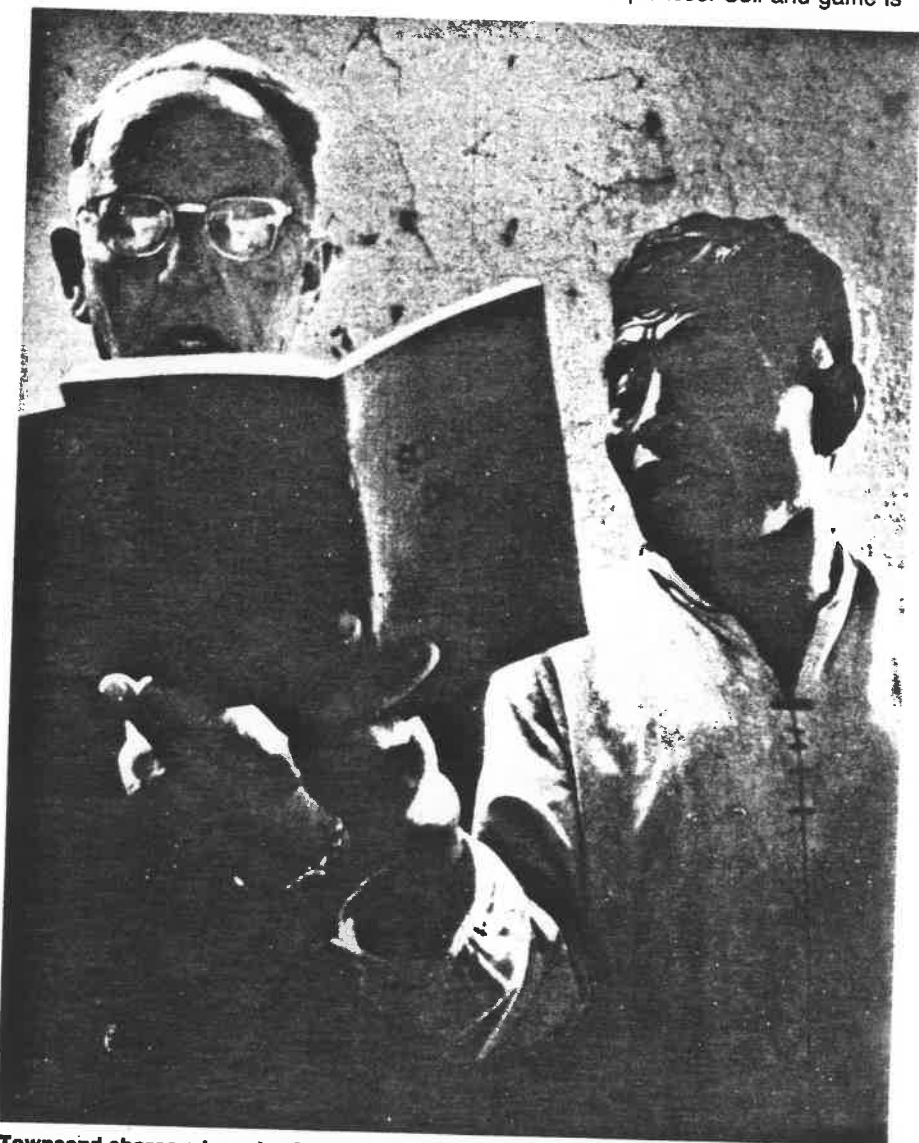
More than who would administer Indian policy was at stake, however. The

very idea of uplifting native people was being called into question. Nearly everywhere, powerful forces are at work to turn native people into landless paupers. Leading the assaults are usually governments and, all too often, naive do-gooders serving official plans in exchange for official backing.

Yet integration programs, many run by Christian missions, have helped previously isolated, illiterate native people defend their communities in new ways. Often unintentionally, Christian missions have contributed to an unprecedented wave of militant Indian civil-rights organizing.

These pressures have led to definite strains in the evangelical approach to native people. In the peasant highlands, the new economic horizons opened by Protestant movements soon fall victim to land monopoly. The colonization program in the jungle is usually an exercise in despair.

In the Amazon, concentrating tribal Indians around schools has had disastrous consequences. Soil and game is



Townsend shares a hymnbook with a Mexican Tzeltal chief during a worship service

evangelical Christianity did so because they felt that their new jobs in the SIL-directed government program depended on it. When the program collapsed, so did the religious observances of many of the teachers.

13. Based on the author's review of available Wycliffe literature.

14. For fine portraits of Townsend's work in Guatemala, see Cameron Townsend, "A Great Cakchiquel Evangelist," *Central American Bulletin* (1924-25), serial July 15 through January 15; Cameron Townsend, "Tolo, the Volcano's Son," *Revelation* (1936), serial April through October [preferable to an expurgated 1981 Wycliffe version]; and numerous letters and articles in the *Central American Bulletin* (1919-1931).



quickly exhausted, new diseases proliferate, and conflicts multiply. Missionaries who thought they were eradicating witchcraft, for example, have increased fear of it by increasing social tension.<sup>15</sup> Finally, many evangelical missionaries still seem to be advocating blind obedience to governments which show little respect for Indian rights.

■ Colonization and civil-rights organizing intensified the ongoing rivalry for influence over native people. A growing number of social scientists and Catholic missionaries began to offer native people more tolerance for their traditions and more support for their land claims. SIL, in contrast, persisted in its support of official policies.

The first major expulsion campaigns against SIL came in Peru and Colombia in 1975. Both followed lengthy, unsuccessful attempts to phase out those branches through official channels.

In Colombia in 1970, government atrocities set off a national debate over Indian policy. Among other things, Catholic missionaries attacked their linguistic institute rivals as a disguised Protestant mission setting up an independent republic in the backlands. SIL's political allies accused the Catholics of subversion and attacked the Catholic Treaty on Missions.

An official body of linguists and anthropologists investigated the conflict. The council's investigators praised SIL's linguistic and humanitarian work. But they concluded that a government contract with Wycliffe Bible Translators for the "moral improvement" of Indians violated the Indians' constitutional right to freedom of conscience.<sup>16</sup> In effect, a church-state separation argument was being extended from its usual target, the Catholic Church, to a government-contracted evangelical mission.

SIL was able to frustrate the council's recommendation for a four-year phase-out. But that fertilized its reputation as a mysterious, uncontrollable power in government.

In 1974, suspicious military investigators even landed troops at the SIL base. Although the Matallana Commission found no evidence of illegal activities, it scarcely vindicated SIL. The investigators concluded that the group had deceived the government about its true purpose, that it was a divisive force in native communities, and that it was a threat to national security.<sup>17</sup>

Again, however, an official body's recommendations were not followed. In the wake of these events, SIL acquired full honors as a suspected CIA front. It was not just that the group operated airplanes and radios in remote areas. Nor was it the wave of CIA exposés elsewhere. Latin Americans often suspect North American groups of CIA ties with-

out hard evidence. But none quite like SIL.

The accusations owe their enormous credibility to SIL's own policies. Once its linguistic facade had been stripped away, it stood exposed as the evangelical mission it promoted itself as at home. Quite naturally, Latin Americans wondered if a group this deceptive might not be concealing even more.

If that were not enough, Latin Americans were dumbfounded at SIL's continuing influence at the highest levels of their governments. The controversies often reached the presidential level and stimulated the concern of the U.S. embassy. If even a high-level military commission, a president, and a prime minister can decide against SIL and nothing change, many Latin Americans reasoned, then who could be protecting it except the CIA?

■ Actually, governments were not about to sacrifice loyal, self-financed North Americans to wild assemblies of nationalists, Indians, and theoreticians who damned official policy and demanded larger subsidies. SIL's "Hail Caesar!" program was a check on civil-rights organizing and leftist alliances with Indians. Perhaps it was a government's only claim to a humane Indian policy.

Like clockwork, it seemed, SIL's military and political allies would block any curtailment of its activities. That would provoke nationalist vendettas against SIL, which would be used to accuse its opponents of communist subversion, which would prompt nervous governments to continue supporting the North Americans.

Yet the group's victories only confirmed that it was an affront to national sovereignty. So, whether to give Washington a warning, court the opposition to their Indian policies, or take a national security precaution, host governments

started to revoke SIL's contracts. By 1981, 130 translation teams wandered in an official wilderness in Brazil, Panama, Mexico, and Ecuador.

To understand what so many Latin Americans fear, we have to look at how the United States used the tribal peoples of Southeast Asia to fight revolutionary movements. SIL was not the right arm of the Green Berets in South Vietnam. But its members did jump into the same bunkers.<sup>18</sup> Its literacy work was funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development. And to protect converts from the proverbial communist bloodbath, SIL supported further military intervention.<sup>19</sup>

This has been taken as a clear warning in Latin America. Wherever SIL operates, it is a potential partner for U.S. military and business operations. Despite the many unfounded accusations against SIL, the apprehension over it is a rational response to North American influence along easily exploited ethnic fault lines. You don't have to be a guerrilla to get nervous about North Americans wielding the kind of influence SIL does around ethnic groups.

■ Also at issue in the SIL controversies are contradictory approaches to native people. So long as a broad consensus on Indian policy prevailed, the expedient could also be the moral: SIL was making the best for native people of a seemingly inevitable process of integration.

But once indigenous organizations and their supporters began to challenge official violations of indigenous rights, SIL's voice became conspicuous by its absence. But not only did it remain silent. As more social scientists and Catholic missionaries swung into opposition to anti-Indian government policies, SIL continued to serve those policies with notable efficiency.<sup>20</sup>

No longer could the group be all

15. For an example of this phenomenon, as well as other problems resulting from SIL-Peru's policy of concentrating tribal populations, see Jerry Long, *Amazonia Reborn* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1970).

16. Gonzalo Correal, et. al., *El Instituto Lingüístico de Verano en Colombia* (Report presented to the National Council on Indian Policy, Bogotá, March 10, 1972).

17. For the commission's 1974 report, see *Antropología* (Medellín: University of Antioquia), Vol. 15, No. 4 (1976): pp. 17-95.

18. For a history of SIL and other evangelical missions in Vietnam, see James Hefley, *By Life or by Death* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969).

19. In a December 1, 1965, letter in the Lyndon B. Johnson Library (Austin, Texas), Vietnam branch director David Blood urges President Johnson to "stand by Vietnam" with his "very essential military actions" against an "utterly diabolical enemy." Despite SIL's claim to neutrality, its support for the U.S. war effort is also clear in the October-December 1971 issue of its own *Translation* magazine.

20. For a mixed bag of anthropological analysis and polemic on SIL, see Peter Aaby and Søren Hvalkof (eds.), *Is God an American?* (London: Survival International, 1981). For more uniformly recommendable anthropological reviews of SIL and other missions, see several of the essays in Norman Whitten

(ed.), *Cultural Transformations and Ethnicity in Modern Ecuador* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

21. In 1981, 86 percent of Wycliffe's membership in Latin America came from the United States, 6 percent from Canada, and 3 percent from Great Britain.

22. Judging from the author's 1975-76 interviews in three Colombian groups (Siona, Yuruti, and Siriano), SIL teams initially explained only that they hoped to study the language and produce primers. According to Wycliffe's former president, "We limit our Christian speech until we are able to express ourselves in the ethnic language. . . . Until a translator is able to speak the local language, . . . personal witness concerning Christ may be misunderstood" (George Cowan, *The Word That Kindles* [Chappaqua, New York: Christian Herald Books, 1979], p. 250).

23. "In every tribe there needs to be someone 'whose heart the Lord opens,' to work alongside the translator in finding ways of expressing the truths of God's Word in the words of his own language," a Wycliffe veteran has explained. "Without a Christian translation helper, the translator is seriously handicapped, for the translation helper needs to have in-depth understanding of the truths he is translating" (Marianna Slocum, "Key People," *Communique* [Lomalinda, Colombia: Wycliffe Bible Translators, 1976]).

24. Cowan, *The Word That Kindles*, p. 235.

things to all people. Forced to choose between governments and opposition coalitions, it chose governments, which might decide to sacrifice it anyway.

■ The obvious solution to Wycliffe's crisis in Latin America—nationalization—has not been very successful. According to Wycliffe officials, few local evangelicals have been willing to take responsibility for raising their own support on a faith basis.

So Wycliffe has continued to expand with North American recruits such as Chet Bitterman.<sup>21</sup> He had been assigned to a fifteen-language expansion program in Colombia—where, since 1972, at least four official commissions, the national linguistic and anthropological professions, most Indian organizations, the Office of Indian Affairs, three cabinet ministers, and a president of the republic have all either recommended that SIL leave or promised to see that it would.

Just as Wycliffe feels that it has no choice but to serve the powers that be, so too it feels it has no choice but to continue expanding. Are not Christians to carry the gospel to all nations and peoples?

Wycliffe's inflexibility suggests the need to analyze how it has interpreted the Great Commission. As churches emerged in most countries, many observers concluded that the need for American missionaries was diminishing. But Cameron Townsend was, by the early 1940s, identifying every indigenous language group in the world as a foreign missionary objective.

Recently Ralph Winter and the U.S. Center for World Mission have enlarged on Wycliffe's 3,279 unreached languages with the "hidden peoples"—16,750 of them. The reported multiplication of indigenous third-world missionaries scarcely offsets the implications of these figures. They serve to justify the continued expansion of white, North American-controlled institutions—even when those institutions are under pressure to change or leave.

■ At one time, the Bible was translated only when a local missionary or church saw the need. Wycliffe has bureaucratized this intuitive, Spirit-led process. Now it leads evangelicals to believe that each Bible translation will give rise to a thriving, indigenous church. By the time translators have invested five or ten years in a language, they have solicited substantial sums of money from family and friends, who expect to see results.

Thanks to the pressure on translators to report a breakthrough, the "two thousand tongues to go" approach easily leads to a kind of coercive evangelism:

● Wycliffe, not a local church or indigenous speakers, decides whether a language group requires its foreign-di-

rected Bible translation and church leadership-training program.

● Members are apparently to refrain from identifying themselves as Christian workers until they can speak the language.<sup>22</sup> Since native people become dependent on outsiders for goods and services, this means that the community will not have a clear choice between accepting or rejecting an evangelical mission until the material pressure to accept it has started to mount.

● Since Wycliffe has found that Bible translation requires converted informants, language helpers must surrender to Christ for a team to fulfill its objective.<sup>23</sup> Then, too, most translators prefer to remove their informants from their communities to Wycliffe's commodious, North American-style bases. Here, where material and psychological pressures mushroom, most first converts are won.

● Wycliffe does not consider its work in a language complete until "there is a nucleus of believers to carry on themselves or with another evangelical group."<sup>24</sup> Regardless of indifference or resistance, Wycliffe or sister missions will persist until some have accepted its particular form of Christianity.

To place this goal in perspective, suppose that a wealthy, foreign religious sect established itself in a city. And suppose that it insisted on staying until a group of believers had been raised up in each block. If that sounds far-fetched, it's no different from Chet Bitterman's objective among the world's last 120 Carijona Indians. Nor would he have been the first (or last) among Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Catholics, and Marxists to insist on a more or less exclusive, doctrinally sound nucleus among this small group of people.

■ Wycliffe's founder recognized that if foreign missionaries filled local pastoral needs, local leadership would not develop. That experienced foreigners might do a better job was no excuse. Local Christians would have to be given the chance to learn from their mistakes.

Wycliffe has yet to recognize a corollary truth, however: if new waves of foreigners rush in to take charge of the Great Commission, national churches may never rise to their responsibility. That foreigners may do the job faster is no excuse, particularly if they are making Bible translation a synonym for gringo imperialism.

Chet Bitterman gave his life to show Latin Americans that Wycliffe is not a CIA front. Unfortunately, the time he purchased so dearly has been used to strengthen the group's ties with several anti-Indian governments, reinforce familiar illusions, and continue business as usual. Instead of rethinking its mission,

Wycliffe has used Bitterman's martyrdom to paint its present dangerous impasse as another evangelical melodrama.

Far from expanding in Latin America at any cost, Wycliffe should start to withdraw now. There has to be a better way to witness to all nations and peoples. □

■ *David Stoll is a free-lance writer with a long interest in the controversies over Wycliffe Bible Translators. His book on Wycliffe, Fishers of Men or Founders of Empire?, will be published later this year by Zed Press in London and Cultural Survival in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

## We Have a Mandate

The response of Wycliffe Bible Translators

■ Wycliffe Bible Translators has frequently sought to suppress public discussion of the serious questions many folks have about its operations. (Here at **theOtherSide** we first tried to raise such questions in 1977 when we published a critical article on Wycliffe by publisher Philip Hamden.) Nevertheless, to promote increased dialogue, we asked Wycliffe to respond to the points raised in David Stoll's article. We even offered to meet with Wycliffe officials in person to discuss the issues involved.

Wycliffe's initial reaction was to label the article "blatantly irresponsible journalism" and to insist that our publishing it would "destroy the gospel" and "plant seeds of doubt" in the minds of its supporters. Responding to the article would be difficult, said John Lindskoog, Wycliffe's public relations director, because "there are things we just don't tell people, things that shouldn't be broadcast."

In the end, however, when we indicated we were publishing the article with or without a response, Wycliffe asked James Yost, one of its staff anthropologists, to respond to the article. Yost's complete, unedited response, written in the form of a letter to author David Stoll, follows.

Mark Olson, Coeditor

Dear David,

Responding to your paper is difficult for me for a couple of reasons. Because of the personal relationship you and I have developed over the past six or seven years, I hesitate to have to discuss before the world issues that we haven't completely covered together in private; I regard you as a friend and value your criticism. Another reason for hesitation is that, to a certain degree, I share some of the concerns your paper expresses. As a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Wycliffe Bible Translators organizations I do not take the view that these institutions are without problems or have no need to constantly review their policies and practices. As you know, there are problems with any institution, and a person who is a member of one has to live with the problems along with the benefits. When organizations get as large as ours, changes come slowly and are sometimes painful. In spite of the problems, I still see a great deal of good resulting from the work of our organizations. I don't see things as grimly as you seem to.

A lot of the basic differences between the way you see us and the way I see us lies in underlying premises. Probably the most obvious is our differing attitude concerning the best way to bring about those changes necessary to end oppression and human exploitation. I interpret you as saying that to be of any value, change must begin at the political level and involve a total reorganization of existing institutions. I don't begin there. There are also those

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who would have us bring about change through the economic sphere by providing massive economic aid in the form of cattle, trucks, tractors, grain, etc. I don't begin there either. To me the starting point is spiritual. I do not deny the validity of the other approaches, nor do I believe others, Christian or otherwise, should not be operating in the spheres they see as most important. But for me, man's relationship to God is the first principle of life. I am convinced that from a healthy spiritual man flows a positive self-image, which is essential if peaceful and meaningful change is going to take place in this world. (I hasten to add that my giving priority to the spiritual does not imply that I will not become heavily involved in the other levels.)

Another basic assumption I regard as crucial is that education, particularly the ability to read and write, is the basis for ongoing justice in today's world. Those individuals or groups who do not have the ability to read and write will forever be subject to exploitation in its myriad forms. Yes, I laud the merits and beauties of the pristine cultural isolate, and I lament the passing of that form of life. But I am continually forced back to the admission that the pristine cultural isolate is not a realistic position in a world bent on the discovery, exploitation, and consumption of every last physical resource. The group that is forced into isolation from the rest of society through illiteracy is defenseless before the crush of "civilization"; it is destined to destruction.

■ If you are really going to understand me and the discussion that follows, it's important to recognize these two presuppositions: I see the spiritual dimension of man as of ultimate importance, and I view education as the critical tool necessary for any kind of sustained self-defense.

If I understand your article correctly, you are concerned about several broad issues. First, we as an organization have generally worked in countries with formal agreements or contracts between us and the government of that country or one of its official institutions. You perceive such agreements as ultimately feeding into the oppression of masses of people. Second, but closely related to the first objection, you see our contracts as preventing us from making international noise about specific injustices. Third, the two organizations which express our unusual characteristics, you see as an attempt to be duplicitous and deceptive. These are the main issues I'd like to address here. Although I don't intend to rebut your paper specific by specific, there are a few places that do demand more detailed comment.

In regard to the first point, it's obvious that we differ greatly here. I have chosen to direct my efforts through existing institutions, i.e. governments—and have done so through formal agreements and contracts. Now I do not believe that there is any government, institution, or organization (including SIL) that is faultless. But neither do I accept the premise that by choosing to work in a formal relationship with a government I am thereby participating in all that the government may be doing, or even assenting to all that it is doing. As long as that government does not force me to act against my conscience concerning what is good and right before God, I see no conflict with trying to bring about change or justice through existing institutions. No government is internally homogenous in its policies or the implementations of them. There are always numerous points of view represented within a government and I am convinced that in most situations I can find within the existing government elements with whom I can identify and cooperate.

Having said that, let me add a qualifier. While I prefer to work through existing institutions in a non-violent manner, I can easily conceive of situations

where I might have to choose to leave a country rather than be a party to any form of oppression. Should a government require that I do anything which I perceive as violating a group's rights, I would be compelled to leave rather than cooperate. I also believe that a situation could change so that a formal contract with a government might no longer be the best way for me to make my contribution, and therefore I ought to terminate the contract. But I find it difficult to accept the notion that because I haven't done so to date as an expression of dissatisfaction with the way things are going someplace, I am, therefore, guilty of aiding oppression.

Nor can I agree with you that not raising an international ruckus about a given issue is "keeping my mouth shut," and therefore, ethically reprehensible. In 1975 when I began trying, within the constraints of the existing government, to help the Waorani gain legal title to their traditional lands, it was not possible to do that and at the same time to "content" myself with "carrying out government policies." At that time I heard no one else expressing concern about the Waorani losing their land, and it was not part of the state concern to see that it was guaranteed to them. Was I keeping my mouth shut and contenting myself with carrying out existing policies simply because I worked within the system to try to get recognition of their rights?

Another, more dramatic example of SIL as an organization not "keeping its mouth shut" and not contenting itself in just living with the *status quo*, is bilingual-bicultural education. SIL critic Richard Smith acknowledges that "I have only the greatest praise for the WBT/SIL's work in bilingual education. They are pioneers in this field in most countries where they are established, and have advocated reading and writing in the native tongue even against the greatest odds." When SIL began its efforts in bilingual-bicultural education in Latin America, it did so in more than one country by trying to work through the existing governmental system to bring about social change without violence. Bilingual-bicultural education was not an existing government policy when SIL began its work, and SIL was very influential in seeing it come about. SIL chose to help create something substantive to meet the problem rather than confront the problem with international rhetoric. Yes, SIL met the problem in terms of how they understood and interpreted it, and they can be criticized for not understanding the problem as someone else may understand or interpret it, but the fact remains that SIL tried to do something about a severe problem. Moving to create a solution to a perceived problem by trying to get governmental support is not keeping one's mouth shut. As anyone who has worked with governments in trying to get policy changes well knows, you can't get changes without talking—and talking long and hard. That was especially true in that context, a context in which Indians were thought of as subhuman and had no rights.

I just don't believe it is accurate to say that SIL is guilty of not taking a stance on oppression. True, we operate through existing institutions, and we do not often choose to make an international issue of situations, but does that automatically make us guilty of ignoring oppression? We have opted to try to operate as a yeast, seeking to infuse society with good (obviously as we see it) rather than trying to function as a hammer, crushing what we perceive as evil. I am willing to be criticized for misanalyzing a situation and to be considered incorrect in choosing a given tactic, but I do not believe it is just to imply that because I choose a tactic which I believe has a better chance of producing peaceful change, I am, therefore, on the side of oppression and injustice. I get the strong impression from your final paragraph that you conclude that SIL should be forced to close out its work. Surely you and I can work in separate ways without having to insist that one of us must withdraw from the matter entirely. I know that we share some of the same ultimate goals, such as justice and human dignity, and I just can't believe that the only way they can be accomplished is for one of us to be eliminated.

As concerns the third issue, that of the two organizations, the picture you paint of Townsend is one of a devious, duplicitous man who invented the scheme of having two organizations to hide from supporters what the members are doing on the field (science, linguistics) and to hide from host governments that the members are Christians trying to translate portions of the Bible. From the quotes you have gotten, one could certainly have come to that

conclusion. But there are a few problems with this. First, why would members need to hide from their supporters the fact that they are doing scientific work if they are *not* doing scientific work (as you imply when you say that the "linguistic facade has been stripped away"? That SIL has been involved in linguistic production from the very early days is clearly demonstrated by the number of technical publications SIL members have authored (over eight thousand by 1982), far more than is necessary just to do Bible translation.

Second, your statement that it took twenty years for Wycliffe to inform home supporters that its members were operating on the field as the Summer Institute of Linguistics is not accurate. As early as the winter of 1943-44, *Translation*, the official publication of the organization, openly stated that its members were affiliated with the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Page one of the lead article, "Two Typical Bible Translators," describes the work of two members in Mexico:

Miss Kiemele (pronounced Kiml) and Miss Potts are members of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, a group of 107 young people who since 1935 have come to occupy 45 other tribes in the mountains and jungles of Mexico. . . . An anthropologist of the National Museum recently wrote: "The members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics have continued their missionary labors, and at the same time they have amassed magnificent data for the studies of linguistics and ethnology in our country."

Again on page five of the same issue we find:

By cable we have received word that the government of one South American country ordinarily closed to missionary organizations has invited the Summer Institute of Linguistics to undertake linguistic work among the Indian tribes there.

It should be noted that the Summer Institute of Linguistics was legally incorporated in California in August of 1942, and these statements were published in late 1943 or early 1944, so there was hardly a "twenty year lag" between the legal formation of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the disclosure to the home constituency that workers were operating as linguists under the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Statements similar to the one above were also made throughout the fifties in *Translation* magazine, and continue today in numerous publications. Most members I have talked to try to ensure that their home constituency understands the relationship of the two organizations.

Third, there is concrete evidence suggesting that Townsend did make it clear to host governments that SIL members would be doing Bible translation. As you pointed out in one of your earlier articles, the President of Mexico, Lázaro Cárdenas, knew of Townsend's intentions when he permitted him to work in Mexico in the late 1930s. In a 1935 letter to the U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Josephus Daniels, Townsend also made it clear to U.S. functionaries in Mexico what his intentions were:

My second objective was a desire, prompted by Christian convictions, to serve my fellow men. I despise scientists who use humanity as laboratory instruments in their research but think nothing of their welfare, just as I detest ecclesiastical emissaries who seek only to inject their dogma while leaving the people in economic, intellectual, and moral stagnation. I was determined not to engage in the propagation of sects but rather to give the simple Bible to people with whom I came in contact. Especially did I desire to see at least portions of this Book of good will and brotherly love translated and published in all of the Indian languages.

In questioning Townsend's motivation, you refer to a 1953 article printed in the Lima, Peru newspaper *La Prensa* in which he is quoted by a reporter as saying that there is no relationship between the two organizations. In your footnote to that discussion you say that the subsequent statements by Townsend "indicate that he was quoted correctly." Yet, eleven days after the *La Prensa* article, Peru's leading daily, *El Comercio*, published a reply that Townsend himself wrote in response to various charges being thrown at him:

In the face of a series of such attacks from the same source, I have maintained silence because I was endeavoring to follow the example of Him who is the Example for every Christian, "who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not, but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously" (1 Peter 2:23). The great respect which I hold for the high office of the author of these attacks has also restrained me. But now that he is persisting in his mistaken opinion and also trying to persuade all of our gracious friends to have nothing more to do with us, I have decided to publish this one reply . . .

In the first place, I wish to emphasize the fact that all the members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics are true believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.

## An Apple for the General

World military expenditures average \$19,300 per soldier per year, public education expenditures \$380 per school-age child.

Ruth Ligard Sivard

Townsend then goes on to expand on the linguistic work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. But he doesn't stop there. He continues,

From the foregoing it is seen that while we are believers motivated by the desire to serve God and humanity, we are at the same time scientists dedicated to the study of all the languages of the world today, little known or completely unknown. . . . We have, then, a dual aspect. Our work, having two aspects, naturally brings us contacts of two types. For this reason, I founded a second institution, which also is non-sectarian, called the Wycliffe Bible Translators. It consists of a small office in Glendale, California, and an even smaller one in Chicago, Illinois. Absolutely it does not have any existence apart from the Summer Institute of Linguistics and its only purpose is to procure funds and recruits for our work. The two institutions are analogous in many respects.

Although Townsend does not specifically name the *La Prensa* article in this response, I find two things significant. First, he was obviously trying to correct what he viewed as misconceptions of SIL's work, although he had originally intended to let the misinformation pass. Second, he is very explicit in defining the relationship of the two organizations (WBT and SIL) to one another. I do not get the feeling that he was trying to conceal the relationship at all.

I am in the unfortunate position of having met "Uncle Cam" only once, and very fleetingly at that, so I cannot be a character witness for him. I, too, have been bothered by the implication of some of the statements you have quoted in your paper, so I began asking people who knew him well what kind of person he was and if they knew how he presented SIL to potential host countries. The overwhelming response I have gotten is that Townsend hardly ever spoke to anyone, government official or otherwise, without leaving the clear message that he was motivated by three driving desires—to see the Bible translated into the world's languages, to help advance linguistics as a science, and to promote literacy to help alleviate social problems.

In addition, all the officers of SIL whom I have interviewed insist that they have been extremely careful to be sure that the intention to translate portions of the Bible has been understood when agreements have been made with host countries. Admittedly, problems can arise when the Bible is not specifically named in the agreement and changes in government personnel occur, bringing in people who were not involved in the original discussions. Not knowing the background information, it might indeed appear to them that deception had been involved.

While I do not believe that deception was the intent in establishing the two organizations, I do recognize this duality as the least understood and most easily misinterpreted aspect of our work. I have talked with members who do not fully understand the reasons for the distinction between SIL and WBT, and I know that they can easily make statements about it that feed the misunderstandings and cast the distinction into a light that makes its purpose appear deceptive. I personally believe that this is a weakness that we in SIL and WBT must confront and seek to correct.

Then why do we keep two organizations? The two organizations were created to communicate. Remember that the Summer Institute of Linguistics was functioning for almost a decade before Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL were formally incorporated. The Wycliffe incorporation was established to communicate more effectively with the home constituency who did not understand the workings of a scientific organization with a religious motivation. Christians who had become scholars were confronted on the one hand with Christians who did not feel very comfortable with "science," and on the other hand with the scientific community who believe that "Christian" and "scientist" are mutually exclusive categories. In an attempt to communicate that they were both Christians and scientists, they established the two organizations to communicate better to the two publics. The more academically inclined members insist that *not* to have two organizations would be at least a distortion of who they are and what they do, and at worst dishonest.

For me personally, the Western obsession for compartmentalizing life into religious, secular, economic, political, and a dozen other categories causes a serious distortion of who I am. It implies that at one moment I am being religious, at another not. Anthropologist Stephen Hugh-Jones in the film *War of the Gods* reflects this distortion when he characterizes the Christian religion as "going to church on Sunday, putting on your best clothes" in contrast to the Indian for whom "there is no religion. Everything is religion." Hugh-Jones holds that the

Westerner has a "category of religion." This is an anthropologist's compartmentalized view of religion, not the Christian's.

For me as a Christian, my beliefs and my commitment permeate all aspects of my being. I am a scientist and I am a Christian, but Western prejudice tries to say I cannot be both—especially at the same time. I want something that communicates that I am both. I do not use the SIL and WBT distinction to try to disguise who I really am, but rather to try to call attention to the fact that I am more than just a scientist and that I am not just a Christian, but a Christian with a very specific orientation. I find that the two organizations focus very well on who I am, a Christian committed to using scholarship to serve God by serving man.

Problems arise, of course, whenever any of our members fail to grasp the vital significance of both aspects of our work. This results in unbalanced representation to our various publics. Such misrepresentation could surely be perceived as an expedient to gain financial support or permission to work in a country. This was not the original intent in creating the two organizations. We have two legal personalities, which we do not view as in any sense duplicious as long as we fulfill our obligations to each of those personalities and as long as we do not attempt to use them to conceal our purpose from those with whom we relate. When we encounter situations in which both aspects of our work are not presented I feel we are obligated to try and correct them.

■ Those are the major issues, David, but I would like to focus briefly on a few minor points as well. I share your concern that we might appear to be Machiavellian or to be using an ethic of expediency. I surely do not accept that as a legitimate ethic. I wonder, however, if you yourself haven't applied a curious twist of the Machiavellian ethic to the situation by citing the problems SIL has encountered, particularly in Latin America, and then implying that the organization or its policies are therefore ethically wrong. Isn't that saying that the existence of problems means something is evil or unethical? Christ certainly never assumed that (John 15:17ff) nor did he experience that (John 19). I am not trying to say that none of the problems that SIL has encountered have arisen because of faults or weaknesses in our approach—SIL certainly should examine itself in the light of the problems and try to correct faults—but I am saying that the existence of problems doesn't automatically imply that somebody has been unethical.

I agree with you that the large number of expatriates we have working in some countries is difficult to justify in today's context no matter how helpful or necessary this may have appeared to be in another era. I too have been concerned for a number of years about our conspicuous presence, but I do not believe that the total withdrawal of our personnel is the only solution. I am personally convinced that a reduced profile would be healthy for both the national church and us, but I also think we still have something to contribute.

Finally, I recognize that we make mistakes and trust that we can learn from them, but I do not take the fact that we err as reason for saying that we should completely abandon our goals and withdraw from the work that we have been doing. I am most disturbed by your conclusion that the "better way" to do something is to do nothing, i.e. to withdraw our efforts. What alternative are you leaving open for implementing solutions to the incredibly vast and complex problems of social injustice that we both know exist? I can't glean from your paper the "better way." Because we can't offer a starving man a fine dinner must we throw away the loaf we have rather than give that to him? I cannot accept what I see as the assumption behind the last section of your paper—that is, that if certain kinds of Christian activity bring a different set of problems to a community, it would be better for all such activity to cease. I believe rather that the Christian witness remains an overriding constraint upon believers though we should certainly seek to make a witness in the best possible way with full respect to the personality and culture of those to whom we go. We are not only convinced that spiritual fulfillment is conducive to effective political justice, but we also take seriously the scriptural mandate to carry the love of God to all men.

Sincerely,  
Jim

## THE OTHER SIDE BULLETIN BOARD

### Job Openings

Needed: *Physics faculty member* with dedication to and excellent ability in teaching and inspiring students in Anabaptist-Mennonite liberal arts church college and potential for participation in part-time solid-state research in the department's endowed Turner Laboratory. For information, call Robert Buschert, Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana 46526 (219-533-3161).

In need of volunteers: *Human Economic Appalachian Development (HEAD) Corporation*, a federation of 45 church-related, community-based organizations across 8 states would like to enlist an educator/field-organizer and a credit union manager to begin March 1, 1983. Salary and/or subsistence negotiable. Contact Jack McLanaahan, HEAD, Box 504, Berea, Ky. 40403 (606-986-8423).

*Bread for the World* needs *Summer Organizers* from June 8 through August 17, 1983. Organizers work with local groups around the country. Contact: Sharon Pauling, Bread for the World, 6411 Chillum Place NW, Washington, D.C. 20012. Food and housing are provided.

### Resources Available

*Nonsexist Scripture Readings*: More than 200 texts following the Episcopal lectionary for the 1982-83 church year; indexed for ecumenical use. Loose-leaf, \$15.95, refundable if not satisfied. St. Stephen & the Incarnation Church, Box 43202, Washington, D.C. 20010.

*Informed Homebirth*, an alternative childbirth movement, offers classes in many parts of the country for couples contemplating giving birth at home, teacher training for those wishing to teach the series, and a midwifery skills workshop for women interested in becoming midwives. Also cassette tapes and books. Contact Laine Snow Gerritsen, IH, Box 788, Boulder, Colo. 80306.

### Services Available

Reader Carl Florea, a *Lutheran pastor*, recently was forced to resign his position because of biblically oriented statements made to his congregation about militarism and materialism. In light of the situation, he and his family fear that finding another position may be difficult. If you know of opportunities, contact Carl Florea, 332 Riverview 3 West, Great Falls, Montana 59404 (406-452-3787).

### Personal Notes

A call goes out to ordained and unordained to join a nonresidential community of folks on Florida's East Coast interested in total/shared ministry. We conduct workshops and seminars and are consultants to congregations that want to learn how to become equipping-of-laity churches. Most work will be nonstipendiary, some paid. Emphasis is biblical and evangelical. Come join our team if you have a gift for enabling others to discover and implement their own ministry. Contact Francis Bradley, SCC, 427 Timberlake Dr., Melbourne, Fla. 32935 (305-242-1421).

### About the Bulletin Board

The cost for messages is \$4 per line. (If that is a hardship, pay what you can.) Copy should be in our hands at least 45 days before month of issue. Contact Phil Harnden, *The Other Side*, 300 W. Apsley St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19144 (215-849-2178).