

## HELPERS BECOME TEAM-MATES

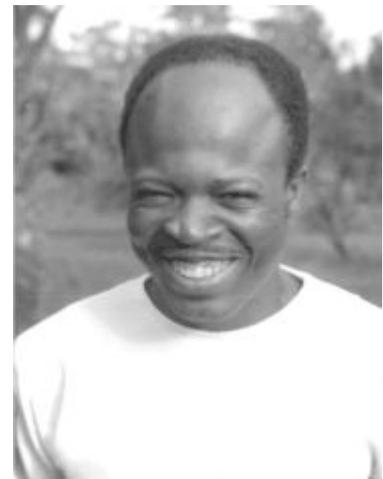
(April - October 1972)

"You have to train 100 young men in order to find one who is motivated and dedicated enough for your kind of work," a government official once told Paul when he regretfully stated that dedicated Nigerian youths were so rare and difficult to find. This proposal had not really been offered as a friendly encouragement, but rather as a polite hint that our Institute was expected to train more and more Nigerians and give them jobs. "Nigerianization" was very popular at that time. "We want to be trained so that we can take over the expatriates' jobs," was the slogan in many mouths.

Paul and I wholeheartedly agreed and so did the other members of our Institute. We did want to work for the time when Nigerians could take over our work. However, training a hundred to find one would be a costly matter! Even to gather those one hundred would not be easy if they could not be promised a job with a fat salary at the end of their training! To live as we did, without the guarantee of a fixed salary at the end of the month, just receiving what the Lord sent through home churches and friends, was unheard of. When we told people how our support came they would often think we were not telling the whole truth.

Surely God, the Lord of all the earth, the searcher of human hearts, had other means of selecting young men to translate His Word. He would not need a ratio of 1:100. With faith and confidence we asked Him to bring us His chosen ones. We were willing to have more than just the absolute minimum trained, for we needed not only translators, but also people who could read the drafts and make comments according to the translation principles they had learned.

It had been known among the few dozen Izi secondary school students that there were a couple of white people who liked to employ young educated men during their vacations. We always had temporary work to do: help with transcriptions, backtranslations, etc.; and hoped that in this way our work would become known in the circles of the emerging Izi 'intelligentsia'. But the previous summer we had had a couple of discouraging experiences with the output and quality of the work of such vacationers which made us decide not to employ any more in the future.



*Justin Ogado*

One applied anyway: Justin. He came and was not so easily put off. He said he had nothing to do during his vacations. Couldn't we give him something to translate

at home? So we gave him a little booklet which explained various customs of the Jews in the Old and New Testament. He left and we forgot promptly about him.

A couple of months later we received a fat envelope in the mail. It contained Justin's manuscript. We marvelled at his handwriting, so neat and clear as if he had printed it. We marvelled at the appropriate drawings he had added to explain the text. Above all we marvelled that he had not made any claim for remuneration as the other Secondary School students had often so arrogantly made.

Paul had put the manuscript on Samuel's desk. After reading a few pages, Samuel rushed back to Paul's office. "Do you know what? Justin's style is just wonderful! Such an elegant Izi, and so easy to read. This is the best Izi that was ever spoken or written!"

This amazed us even more. Did the Lord want to say something to us? Should we ask Justin to work full time with us? He attended the Roman Catholic church, but did that matter? We invited him now to take part in a three-week introductory course in Translation Principles. We asked some other young men from our three language areas to attend that course as well and offered to cover their expenses. We wanted to train a number of them in order to have their capabilities evaluated.



*Translation workshop in Abakaliki just for participants of Izi, Ikwo and Ezaa with Katy Barnwell as instructor. Justin is second from left in back row, Thomas Uzim first from right*

It didn't surprise us to hear that Justin came out on top of all the 36 students from about 10 languages! We were certain that the Lord had chosen him. No wonder he joyfully agreed to put off his university training for a year to work in our team, first in his summer vacation and then full time from November onwards.

Off and on during the previous year, I had been working with Samuel on the Izi primer. It had been a test in patience! The 46 different Izi sounds had to be

introduced slowly one by one and the lessons to be built up carefully. The stories had to be composed with a very limited vocabulary only, not introducing more than two or three new words, and yet had to be highly interesting! Here again, Samuel's gifts of intuition, imagination and a good memory were indispensable. And he was patient enough to endure the countless revisions!

Samuel's young sister was the first one with whom I could test out what we had written. She faithfully came and read the primer to me. Yes! Our self-teaching method worked! Apart from the first lessons, I did not have to teach her, and yet she had never been to school. I just sat beside her and listened to what she read, and made notes of places where she stumbled or got confused. These we later revised.

Much later, when the primer had already been duplicated and some copies distributed, Samuel came back from one of his trips and exclaimed:

"It works!"

"What works?"

"Our primer 'Oroke'! I met a man who learned to read all by himself! When I was there, he had just reached one of the last stories. He read it aloud to himself and he laughed and laughed because he thought the story funny and liked it so much!"

"Oh, really?" Isn't that something! Do you know how long it took him to learn?"

"He said he started about three months ago."

"And are you sure he had never gone to school before?"

"Yes, he never went even for a day!"

That was good news. We rejoiced, for much prayer had gone into the writing of the primer. Our joy increased as Elias and Daniel started to work on the primers in their languages and found that the majority of the Izi keywords could be used for Ikwo and Ezaa. How grateful we were, for this saved us a lot of time. So it was only a few months after the completion of the Izi primer that those for Ikwo and Ezaa could also be duplicated.

One day Paul asked the Ikwo translators why their progress seemed so slow.

"It's not possible to translate so quickly! We have to think what the text means and how to say it. We have to consult the Exegetical Helps and other books. We do not want to produce slap-dash work!" was their answer.

"Have you not all been interpreters in your respective churches?"

"Yes, all of us."

"How is it possible, then," inquired Paul, "that anyone of you can stand up in the church and translate at great speed for your pastor or any evangelist?"

Then came the humble confession of what they had realized since they were with us:

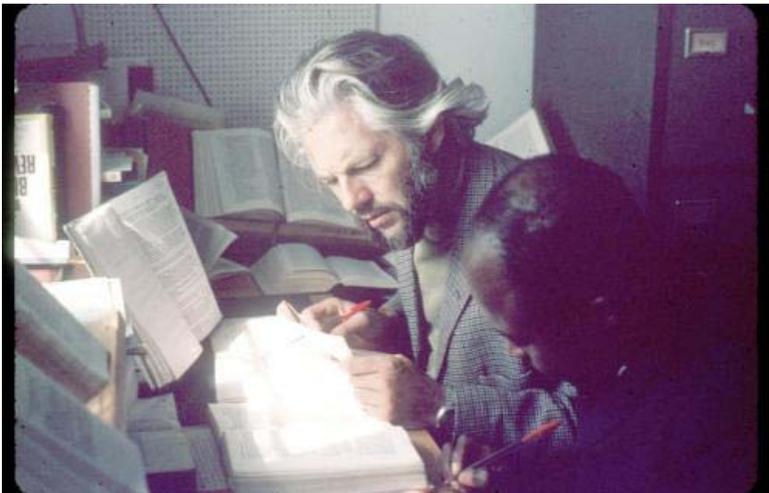
"There is not one interpreter in our area who does not make a mess of what he translates..."

How many have turned away because they could not make sense out of the interpreter's translation? Because they misunderstood the Good News?

It was apparently only when the words are written down and open to examination that you had to be exact, hitting the target. Our translators had an awesome fear of the curse expressed in Rev. 22:18: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book; if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city..."

They were so conscious of this warning that they had great difficulty getting away from the literal meaning of the text, although the course on translation principles had laid great emphasis on naturalness and use of idiomatic expressions.

Friends often asked or wrote to us: "Do you and your African translators translate from the original Greek text? Do they know Greek?"



*Paul translating with Justin Ogado*

To this we had to reply that Paul indeed had his Greek New Testament for reference on his desk, but did not work directly from it. Our African translators did not know a word of Greek. But this was not necessary. There had been so many worthy scholars of Greek who had passed a life-time in study, who had written books on the exegesis of each verse - how could we ever measure up to them? Should we not take advantage of their tremendous insight?

Furthermore, our own organization had produced books of Exegetical Helps, compiling the comments of the most famous scholars for each verse. The United Bible Societies had made their Translation Aids available also. Therefore the exegesis, the meaning of the text, was not the greatest problem for our translators.

They had dozens of English versions to consult on their desks (e.g. eight in one single book!) so that they could see how others had solved the translation problems of difficult passages. And in addition, Paul had an equal number of versions in French and German at hand!

So usually the main problem was not to determine the meaning of the original text. It was far more difficult to translate into an idiomatic, natural everyday speech. There are many helps for the understanding of the text, but there is only one way to the idiomatic rendering: to have the African translator see again and again that the human New Testament authors do not want to be thought of as interpreters of divine oracles. They must speak in such a way that they could be mistaken for one of their fellowmen living today. To achieve this, we were constantly thrown back on prayer, and on demanding a lot of our translators.

Paul had first thought that the Izi version could be adapted to the two other dialects Ikwo and Ezaa. Hadn't he spent hours and hours going over each verse with Samuel? Hadn't they agonized for weeks over certain expressions? Hadn't they together finished more than 50% of the second draft and checked it verse by verse with the consultant? Surely it could be adapted to Ikwo and Ezaa without using too much time. They were dialects that differed roughly only in about 5% in their vocabulary.

But Paul had not reckoned on certain cultural clashes in the area; nor had he reckoned with the independent spirits of the translators!

"Should we Ezaa people bend to the Izi people? We should accept their translation? Never!"

"No," Paul explained, "I do not mean accept the Izi translation for your people. I mean read it and then transpose the same renderings into good Ezaa!"

It was no use explaining. They repeated they would not 'bend' to Izi. To accept something from Izi was humiliating. For them, the Izi were backward people, cruel, idolators, keen to quarrel, poor - in short: to be looked down upon. Although they were historically brother clans, there was hardly any mixing among them. In the past the Izi and the Ezaa had even made war against each other. There was nothing else to do but to let each one, Ikwo and Ezaa, do their own drafting.

But discussing each draft separately was just too time-consuming for Paul and the pressure unbearable. Another alternative, to work with all three translators at the same time, failed completely. Their heated discussions among themselves hindered any progress. Certain passages caused additional problems, because the translators had misunderstood the text or stumbled over its teaching.

"Would it be possible to change the order in Mark 10 verse 7?" the translator had asked Paul.

"How would you like to change the order?"

"Well, as it stands now, it does not reflect our own culture," the translator had answered. "What I propose is: 'A woman shall leave her mother and father and be joined to her husband...!'"

No, to this Paul could not agree. Jesus did not talk here in a symbolic way. This was God's order for creation. But Paul was glad that slowly the realization might dawn on them that something in their treatment of women and wives might not be according to God's order!

In the letter to the Ephesians, chapter 5, the teachings about husbands and wives were another stumbling block to them.

"When our men hear this, how they should love their wives, they will not like it," some said. And verse 21, about being subject to one another, they wanted to suppress altogether...

The verse in Eph. 4:30: "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit," both Thomas in Ikwo and Daniel in Ezaa had translated, "Don't make the Holy Spirit angry." Paul explained that these were two very different emotions, that you can grieve somebody a hundred times maybe, before he gets angry. At last Thomas understood.

"You know," he said, "for years we have been told in our church that you should not make the Holy Spirit angry. We could not imagine what this meant. We asked ourselves what terrible things would make the Holy Spirit angry. But we would never have dared ask anyone."

He beamed as he himself found the appropriate rendering: "Do not cause the Holy Spirit the least pain."

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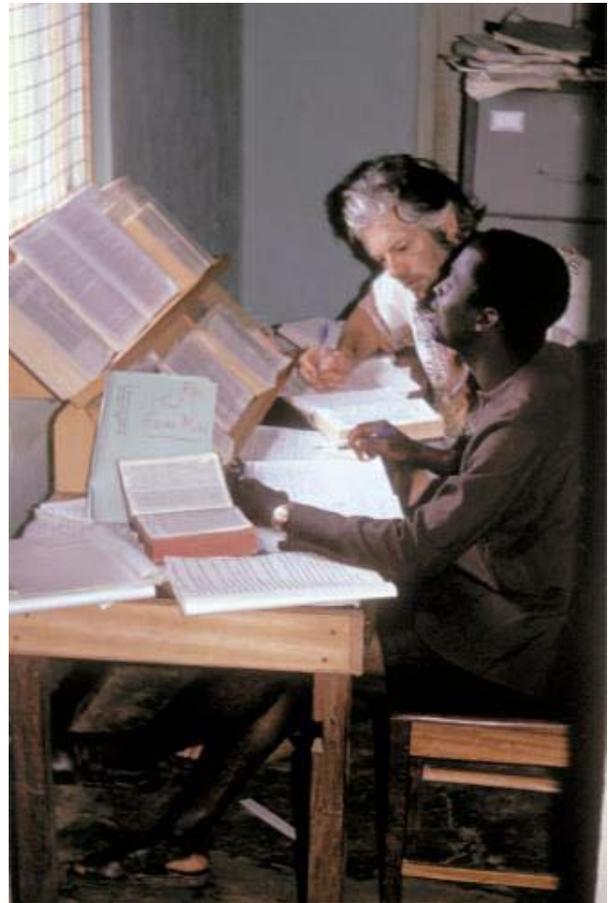
"It has become quite clear to me," Paul told me one day, "that I can work with only one person at a time. Even two at a time would be too much. But instead of working through all the New Testament books with every dialect, I am thinking of distributing the books among the three dialects. I would work it over with a translator - preferably not the one who produced that draft - and that version would then become standard for the other two dialects, a model version to be adapted by the other two. In this way no one would get the impression of being only an underling of the other; every dialect would have the joy of having produced some model books which the others would have to follow. I have not thought of all the details yet, but I think we will proceed in this direction. If the men are not open to reason, then I will just have to put my foot down. There is no alternative now."

The men were indeed open to reason. They had realized their failure. They understood that time wasted in fruitless discussions was also money wasted. They agreed that we wanted to be a team putting the Word of God into the hands of the people in the shortest possible time. And they agreed to work together according to the method which Paul outlined.

So the 'model approach,' as Paul termed it, was planned and inaugurated. To each of the language teams he assigned a certain number of New Testament books for which a first draft should be made. He would then go over that draft verse by verse with the main translator of the team and that version would subsequently become the 'model' from which the other two dialects would formulate their versions.

By the end of the year 1972, there were 8 men at work: Samuel and Justin for Izi, with Emmanuel at the typewriter; Thomas and Elias for Ikwo, with William typing; and Daniel for Ezaa, but still with no one to help him.

So far we had been co-workers: now we had started to become team-mates. We were no longer working on three separate translations, but just one triple project: to translate the New Testament into the Abakaliki dialects. To reach this starting point, it had taken us a whole year... Was it wasted? In productivity, yes, but not in character growth.



*Preparing a « model » translation with Daniel Eze in Ezaa*