

New spaces and paths for ministry in the collaborative cohort model of Bible translation

by Emil Ninkure, with Benjamin Pehrson

Introductory comments by Benjamin Pehrson:

Metaphors are a powerful communicator in the language communities of Papua New Guinea. Emil Ninkure, translation advisor for the Aitape West Translation Project, sees the recent construction of new buildings at our remote translation center as a metaphor and clear visual representation of other new ministry spaces that God has been leading our local multi-language team into. God has been guiding us along paths that lead us into a healthier and improved process of doing Bible translation, and into a greater understanding of the truth of God's Word. Paths that lead us into redemptive community, to love God above all else, and to serve others in love, even extending this to our enemies. God's path is leading us to invite more and more local people to come alongside our team in these new training spaces and experience the way, the truth, and the life that we have been experiencing through the Word and the Spirit while they are equipped in language development service opportunities and Scripture engagement training that are complementary to the Bible translation task. God's path is leading these same people to then return together to the new ministry spaces of their language communities in bigger numbers to work together to share the truth and life of the gospel with others. Thus, while God has been leading us to improve our processes in the task of Bible translation, he has also been leading us into more holistic Bible translation and language development ministry. The new physical spaces at our translation center have opened up opportunities to facilitate a centripetal movement of more people to come alongside the Bible translation task in various complementary training opportunities, and in turn to go out on centrifugal paths back to their respective communities in continued collaboration together. These local colleagues are not just going back out to their own language communities, but they are also interested in following the model they have witnessed and benefited from in that they would be trained as trainers to go out and help other language communities as well.

It is a small minority of local believers who are taking the lead in discerning these paths as opportunities that the Lord is putting in front of us despite a wide range of persecution and opposition that they are facing, even from among the various local churches where denominationalism is prominent and a healthy understanding of God's truth and Christian ethics is still mostly hidden in syncretism and confusion. That is the general context for the progress report that Emil Ninkure provides below.

Emil became a part of the Bible translation movement in 1991, joining his local language translation team that year as a mother tongue translator. Their original thinking was that they would finish their Arop translation, and then later help the neighboring language groups to also get a translation of the Bible in their languages as well. In 2001, however, the Arop translators selflessly slowed down their own progress in Bible translation in order to start working together with and training new mother tongue translators from ten additional languages in the region. This was just a few years after a tsunami had decimated their coastal homeland and the neighboring

language communities, and it was impressed upon them that God's work needs to be done in his timing with his resources. Emil now manages the workshops that happen several times a year for these language teams at the translation center in his own Arop village.

I asked Emil if he would be willing to share an oral report of what he has seen God doing in the Aitape West Translation Project in recent months as this is a significant season of recommitment and expansion of the ministry that has grown out of the long-term discipleship process that has happened in the context of Bible translation over the last 15 years among this collaborative team of translators. In his report, Emil refers to discipleship and ministry opportunities that the local team members want to take advantage of now that we have recently built additional dorm rooms and classroom space. He refers to the willingness of the translators to invest their own resources in acquiring solar-powered tablet kits that will enable them and others to continue translation and language development ministry in their villages between workshops. He refers to discipleship and Christian leadership development needs that were confirmed to us in our discussions with local and district church leaders. He also refers to what our perspective is in the face of opposition that we have experienced from those who have rejected the ministry that God is doing through us in this place. In all of this Emil reflects a commitment that this team has had from the beginning to continually apply good critical thinking skills to everything we do, adjusting as we go to improve our processes as we seek the Lord for his wisdom and direction.

The following is an abridged idiomatic translation of his report that retains his oral style, consultant checked for accuracy by Emil himself.

New buildings mark space for new paths of Bible translation and discipleship

Alright, so I'm always here and I observe many things, and regarding the project itself, I myself am quite happy. Here's what's happening: many things are in the process of changing. Many and various new things are bringing good change. So for example, the buildings.

Now we have new buildings that were constructed: a new classroom was constructed, we are using it, and here's my assessment of this. It's a good new thing. When we go in this new classroom, our way of working has also changed. It's like this: when we were at the old place where we normally worked on the verandah, it was like all the men were free to walk around. So when we are in the new classroom, the men are busy because they feel like a fence is giving them a boundary. It's not like a wall is really truly fencing them in, but there's another thing that has happened that is even more interesting, and I believe it's not just interesting. It has come to be a really big deal as well. What I see is that with all these kinds of discussions that we are having, there is really good new development.

Regarding the work of translation, about that, it's like they recognized that "Oh, okay, this thing I have in this verse that so-in-so is talking about, I must straighten it." Because, when you talk, there are two or three kinds of things that happen at the same

time. One, they look at their translation work to fix it. They see how they will get it to be natural, and also, you help them to look at the accuracy and clarity of the thing we're talking about.

And something else: when we have discussions about these kinds of things, it's like it does the work of preaching. The work of preaching the Word is part of this in much of the discussion. Many of us who are involved in the work of Bible translation work in our churches. But there are many deep things, and we don't know these deeper things well, and when we are doing the work of translation and there is a translation topic and we are talking about it, and when you talk and the other advisors also contribute, this really strengthens our thinking more and it inspires many as well to also recognize that, "Okay, I must translate this message well in order to help others." And also at the same time, when we are discussing these things, this helps each translator also in the behavior of his life, to believe.

And this is something that is also a big thing: that our work doesn't go just one direction. Previously, I observed that it went one direction in that we were just translating, and many translators were working in isolation, and when they saw something, maybe they would translate it in a different way and then later the advisors' notes would come. When the advisors' notes came, they would feel sort of like two different things. They would feel like, "Hey, this man wants to just give me work. He must think that I... that I am a lazy man." Alright, another thing, when they themselves would do their exegesis, this exegesis didn't help them very well either to effect their inner beings regarding each one's behavior. I see that the new path, or the new way we are doing things now in that we all are sitting together and focusing on this book and this verse, and everyone discusses it together: I believe that this helps them even more.

When we held these translation workshops, this pattern emerged as a different kind of thing, and even I was happy, that this way of doing things is important. Advisors can give notes, but when the translators look at notes and they respond, it's not a good method to just resolve them. But instead maybe give feedback to the advisor, and the advisor will weigh and consider what is said. If it is an important idea that will also impact the lives of us translators, then I really think it can also be a discussion topic. Okay, if each one hasn't straightened it well, alright they can correct it, and if so, many will really fix it, but then I think it's even better to go deeper and talk out more about this passage so they can evaluate their translations, but also, maybe they are convicted about themselves, and they will know that, "Oh, if I am convicted like this, I must also translate accordingly in order to help others as well."

New buildings mark space for new paths of Bible translation ministry

But something else—it's like I said—I am really happy that these new buildings came about. These new buildings went up and everyone in the group is busy. That, that is really something. There's many various new things happening, and it's also changing the style of the way we work. So, for example, it's true that the translators often tend to practice the old ways, but I saw that for many of them, they tried to leave behind this old lifestyle of theirs. And then their thinking was stimulated further. They were inspired that they cannot just do their work here, and then leave it here and go, and then forget it and do whatever they want, and later, after they've sort of gone back to their old ways, and when they come here to give them "soap" and preach at them to

get clean and straighten back up. That's hard work to keep washing and washing. So they desire that when they acquire good thought patterns and behavior here and when they go, they must go and still do their work. So I really think that it's good that we could respond to their expressed need and find a way that we can really help them to have the opportunity to purchase village tablet kits. We can really help them so that they can continue this work, and maybe what they learn here, it will still remain, and they will go and still use it. And, that's it. I mean, I really think that's a good way forward.

But then, I realize there's a problem with the money, and other things like the translation software not working yet on tablet computers. But, it's like this: I am happy that as things continue to change, new ideas also continue to emerge, and improvements in the manner of our work are being established. So then, regarding the buildings, as I already said, these discussions happened, and this has allowed us to recognize new paths that we can take. And when we took these new paths, these new paths revealed yet another thing to us that we must do to help even more. So it was as if, at this time, that when their thinking was inspired, they had strong convictions that, "Alright, we want to do our work in our villages," but it's true, that this one thing made their faces fall down a bit... this statement: "Alright, you yourself must pay for the equipment to work in the villages." But, well, I myself, I feel that it's like they tend to have this idea that, "Oh, the project will look after me for every various thing," but... well, even I used to have this kind of thinking. But now at this time I feel like, "Alright, given this situation, if I want some good thing, I myself also need to stand up using my own strength. So then, with that in mind, when the idea came up of these new computers—of finding a way to facilitate them getting computers to help them in their villages, and asking they themselves to buy them—I was happy for me. If this happens, I also am happy to buy one as well. So, contrary to their initial reaction, I think that when they went home, they surely must have settled the matter well in their minds. And they want this. So that's that.

New buildings mark space for new paths of ministry training

And regarding training, when these other things changed, this also brought about new ideas about various things. So, for example, when you talked about the Greek training that would be offered, I also felt like, me too, when I went to school, I felt like "I'm a school boy." And I learned this Greek stuff, but when I came home and I was with my wife and children, I felt like, "Oh, I'm a father." So I forgot it. But I am really happy that there's a plan for these regular incremental training opportunities to come up.

And I think that another thing about many of the translators is that they are at a disadvantage, because they haven't been able to take part in Biblical training even though many of them are always using it since they are church leaders in their villages. So when they became church leaders and they do their work, they each operate under the doctrine of their churches. But then, many now are realizing that when these team discussions were coming up, more advanced things, Biblical training, is also coming up. This changed them. It changed something in their brains, like their attitudes and their behavior. And I think that probably many of them when they went back home were speaking a lot to their leading men, and saying, "Alright, I often go and I have seen with my own eyes about this thing, and it has these good things about it."

So, it's like this: many people are in the process of sort of looking to some good thing, like when the two of us were with that district church leader. When I heard him talking, I was listening to him talk about church leaders who do not know the truth of God's Word, but my mind was on us here in our language projects. These kinds of issues, many are just like that, and they see this project as something other than what it is. But as different kinds of church leadership training opportunities like that continue to come up, and these kinds of things, then it's like many of the translators: they themselves are going back and putting this new important thing of the truth of God's Word back into their churches, where, I think they are — it's like what; what can I say — they modify, or they are doing whatever is needed now. They are doing this because the old way is really firmly established, and it's like it already has roots, but this new important thing will help many. It's like when we were at the team discussions and you spoke of relationships — and this important thing, yes I saw that this topic of relationships — it shot to our hearts in a lot of us.

It's like this. Many of us, we tend to see things from only one angle and we say, "Oh, I'm a church leader, so everyone must see that I'm right." But then, when we sat down and did our work, the work also challenged all of you expat staff too. Because there are many various things that are in each of our lives still, so therefore, I am experiencing joy because at this workshop, many different things came up. Like, it's true, we had food. We had all the various things that we had before. But the really big thing that I saw in this workshop, it was this thing where we moved up to the new classroom and sat at a place where the men did not move about. The translators didn't move around. They stayed full time, inside, and they were — how can I say — trying to acquire knowledge of many things, because when we were all involved in the team discussions, it became like we were in the house of worship and someone was preaching.

It was like that, and I am not against you that you preached to us. No way! I am happy and I say that because there are many deeper things inside the function of the Bible. It was like this: a lot of us tend to translate it as if it is just words. And we don't tend to see this as another kind of thing. So when we had the team discussions that you were leading, and you were talking about many things it was a really important thing that you did, and if you don't have time to be here, this is what I want: that whatever advisors are here, they also must do this sort of thing. Because any book that we translate, all these books have a reason for being included and making up this whole Bible. So there are messages that are really important for, well, it's huge for those of us who translate first of all, and afterwards, for others.

New buildings mark space for new paths of local church renewal

So then, it's true, I have to say, many just like us say "I'm already a Christian." But, yes, in reality, "Christian" is really this word that has true fruit that shows if we are following, or maybe not. And perhaps this talk of relationships is like this: you and I say that we're Christian, but for many things within the Church, you and I consider a man to be different and we do things differently and continue to do things differently, and even make sermon preparations, each of the translators by himself, because many translators are themselves church leaders as well. So it's much better for them to receive the inner things first and then go. And maybe through them they will change their churches.

I don't see this simply as a team discussion either. I see it as training as well. It's also training. I mean, I see that it is one piece of training that instructs the men who have this responsibility of preaching or doing whatever. It's true, you didn't teach them with outlines and the like, but something you said to them — maybe at some time it will become something that they will use to pierce the hearts of different people — they will use this thing you helped us with to preach it clearly. And, you really helped us to understand as well. And we too, maybe we will tell others like, "Yeah, these words here that you and I are reading, they read like this, but the deep things of this message are like this." And the big point, it's this talk of relationships.

New buildings mark space for attracting others to God's path of life and service to others

This kind of talk, this talk of relationships is something that's a really big thing. It's a big thing because many of us—yes, we often say—I say, "I'm a church man." But then, many details about viewing someone else as what kind of relationship to me, it's... it's not... it's just not there. And also, many times I have some good thing, but I will hide it and say, "Oh, sorry, it's just this," so now I deceive. And a big thing is this: the buildings went up, and that's really alright. At first I had this idea that this is a dormitory for the women, because the women normally use Ben's house. But later, you told me, "It's not for the women. It's for everyone." So, that's right, I now stand firm saying "Okay, this is a dormitory for everyone. If women come, they'll use it. Whatever man may come, he will use it." So it has become like an even better thing that allows us to attract many people to come, because we have a place for them to sleep, and there's a place for them to work. So before we only had this verandah, and when one group was here, another group wasn't. But now, there's this verandah and there's this classroom, and when one group is over there, one group is over here, so they will talk back and forth, "What did you guys learn today?" So they will tell them, "Oh yeah, we learned this thing, and what about you guys?" So they will go like that, they will discuss back and forth, and maybe there will be good changes that develop in the work and in the churches. Because before, we would just be by ourselves, and all people said, "Those are their meeting places." But now, when this dormitory went up where many different groups will come, and these various people will understand, saying, "Hey! What do they normally do here?" And someone will sit down and story and say, "Oh, we normally work like this, and we hear this kind of stuff, and we get taught about this kind of thing." And they'll say, "Okay, you tell us." Maybe it will change the thoughts of many people. It will change... I say 'maybe', but it will happen. It will happen.

Connecting people around the one central thing

I have a big love of training. Training, well, it's true, I have gone to a lot of advanced training courses. But then, it was many years ago, and when I came back, well we moved on to various other things, so the training that I also got to receive, it ended up being for nothing. I don't apply it either and put it to use. So then I think that, if training opportunities come up here, it will be a new thing for some, and okay, maybe it will be the second time or third time for the others. But now, we bring it all the way to the village level where maybe many people will come at just the right time, they will sit and see this kind of training come up, and maybe they will want what they see as well.

Studies in exegesis, for example there's New Testament, Old Testament, there's those. And about those, they're good in that they take people to go deeper and really understand about these. And maybe the first missionaries taught us to be like them in church, to do it like this and like that. Maybe sometimes, they just covered over what was already there and the truth isn't spoken. But they said those things in order to just promote this church, and so it's like this holds. It's fixed in our thinking. But I'm not saying that we will challenge the different church traditions, but maybe teach the truth of it, and this truth will help when they carry it back and use it in their villages, and it can bring about an impact for the people. So then, now they can—there's this difference between truly reading the Bible and this talk they received—they can truly read the Bible and receive the straight message. Because now, there's a lot of talk that just came from the mouth of missionaries. And the missionaries put it here, it stuck, it's firm and still here and all the people follow it. And I say this because, I see that here, it's hard. You're not able to get one church to come so you can try to change it. That would be difficult, but I think that training courses and the ways that we all are using now, and how, like how we were saying in the team discussions, these things will help the translators. The translators themselves then will go and maybe they will talk with their church leaders and that sort of thing, and they'll say "Oh, I went and learned this kind of thing," and if the church leader wants to talk, he will say, "Okay, this Bible verse, and this kind of thing..." so maybe there will be change. Change at the local level. But it will happen like this: the start of it all, it has started here, and it will spread, and then... Maybe it will do its work now. Maybe the kind of thinking that has continued to be closed here and is here to stay, it will open.

And now it'll be like this: all of us will work together. And it's this sort of thing: when I talk about this, I'm talking about—not the sort of thing like training courses just to get knowledge—but I'm talking about training for doing the work, and also for helping a man, he himself. And when it helps him personally, maybe he will feel happy, and he will say, "Okay, I must help him too. And I must help him as well." It's this sort of thing: I'm talking especially about different kinds of Biblical training, for example, to go deeper and really break it down, and this helps more.

So it's good training for the translators. But still, I think that for the majority of these things, the literacy workers must get training for these things. Because I think that they are new, and they don't have good computer training, these kinds of things. And, I don't think the literacy people understand and know very well about the alphabet of their languages. So you will see that many times there will be differences in spelling so we don't have consistency. So, maybe these are better training opportunities for all the literacy group, and when the literacy people continue to go further, and they come, so that they also when they are here may be present in these kinds of things that are happening in the translation work—for example, the parts of it that can go inside of them too—because they cannot just become slaves of this work. They must become true people of... well, they also must experience the true joy of the Word for themselves as well.

So I see that many things are changing like that but it's changing in order to help. But then, there is a lot of different work to be done, and you expat missionaries will not be able to stay here full time. You cannot stay full time, so this needs to work, and it must exist first, and later again at another time, and also, when we are doing this, you won't have to come and do it again. You will have to go and do something else. But, I

think that if we look ahead well, then we will put the training to—how to say—the right people. If we put this training to the right people, then this training will be able to have fruit that comes from it. And, whoever has a need to use it a little, okay he can receive just a little part of it. The bigger share of the training must go to the right people so they can use it directly for the right areas so, if we do that, we will see that this work will develop well. And when if we use the translation and literacy groups together—not just them, but the people doing Scripture engagement too: they also need training for it; they also must really understand about it—we will all become friends who share in the same work together. When we all become friends and co-workers together, and when someone does something, another will say, "Oh, I can help you." And when he does, people will ask, and he will say, "We do it like this. And we do it like this. You must come." So then, we will connect and bring together all the people and keep going on like that. I personally, according to my thinking, I think that we must help our literacy groups better, and our literacy groups must really understand these things. And they can use it more.

And we translators—when we are looking for good expressions or what kind of good way where we feel that it has a certain kind of reason to be in the translation—we will use these programs, and contribute to the whole team, and maybe when the literacy people see what we've done, maybe they will question us a little and say, "Why did you put this? That there, what is the work of that?" Okay, the translator explains, and okay, the literacy person uses it.

Another big thing, it's Scripture engagement: it involves the churches, and many people in the churches. And it's like this, like when the two of us sat down with the district church leader in town, it's true that training can go out to various different sectors, or whoever is in the churches, but I think that the most important thing is for the church elders. It's all these people who must have a way to receive proper training and—not as if to give them an education, because, they would feel like "Oh, these people are underestimating my knowledge," no—but I think this kind of thing that we do during team discussions, that the same kind of thing must go deep within these church leaders. Like what I heard him say: many of the people now want to lead the churches, they haven't gone very far in school, and now they want to become church leaders. A lot of the churches are here now because "I went somewhere and this church was in that place and I stayed there and worshiped there and I came back and started one of those churches in my village." I myself did this first. So, you'll see that many churches have popped up, but they don't have good understanding of the Bible. So many people, when they read one verse, they can preach one, two hours on it about one little part of something where many things that they put inside, it's just garbage.

So when I heard this district church leader speak like that I was happy. I was happy because of this: when I am here doing this work of Bible translation, I have also observed that. Oh, this church that I'm at too, my pastors, and whoever else as well, they don't think of... well, supporting the people and bringing them along to go well on their journey, and really helping them, and really giving to them. And they come back again to help these things: they just come, and only perform the worship rituals, and they say, "You must worship like this, and do this, continue following these steps until the end of the service." And many people say, "I'm a church leader, I've arrived. I'm an important person." But, what is the important thing in this work he has? The Word of God is important. His Word, that's important, and this man beats his chest

saying, "I'm a church leader," but, he is really lost about this "little" thing within the church. So because of this I have been feeling that probably with Scripture engagement, we... we have work to do. This is not the work of teaching them about the doctrine of their churches, but teaching them about the doctrine of the Bible, which is the Word of God.

If we are thinking that various training opportunities will come up, it's not just for the translators. We must look at whatever areas we have for working together and bringing about good fruit. So then, I think that WeSay and SayMore and Bloom are good tools for helping the literacy people. And as for Scripture engagement, that there are many different things, but that it's not something just for these expats who oversee it. I, the project too, we have work in which we must support it. And we should do it like this: all the areas in which we work, we need to identify just the one central thing.

So then, when I was in Aitape, I heard this district church leader talking about many of their people, their church leaders, how they don't have a good understanding of the true work of the church. He's doing well to recognize the real situation; he is carrying out his responsibility to request workshops to equip church leaders in the true work of the church. But this thing that happens to us on the inside as a result of the true nature of this work, most don't have it. So that... *that* is the big thing we're dealing with here in these villages. I mean, they just don't have it. So then, as I've said, the training workshops—like for translation, different kinds of training—that is something that will really help them more, because many of them, they're church leaders. The translators themselves. Okay, with this kind of thing, if they feel it really helps them and they use it well, I think these kinds of things must also help the Scripture engagement people. Yes, them as well, and it must help the literacy people, because then, it will have an impact here and here and here, and all of us must get understanding about the one important thing and we will focus on just that.

So up until now, we all have different tasks, and we have focused on limited tasks. I myself focus on a different part. You focus on another. Another man, he'll focus on yet another. So we focus on all different things now. But this central point that we all should be focusing on here, we don't focus on it because you have your own different way of doing things. Maybe you went to school or you learned this or that, so you look at it in one kind of way. Okay, and you, if you expect me to look at it the same as you, that's hard, because I'm a different man. And maybe our training has been different, or maybe my brother comes from a different background. So look here. We don't have the same thought processes. And we don't have the same whatever for going along on our life's journey.

God is the boss, and it's about his timing, will and reputation

So then, I am thinking that this is the biggest way that this project can take the Bible to go to all the people: many Bible books, and we are translating one book at a time. About that, when we started receiving a lot of opposition from someone a few years ago, I replied and he then responded to me, "Oh you're beating your chest, alright you must come out in public and tell them when you will finish the Bible." And I said to him, "That's not my job. It's not my job for me to finish the Bible. I am following the will of God himself. What time, and what things God tells me to do, that's what I do. And what time he wants me to finish, that's when I'll finish." All that kind of talk. So it's not a garden or a trade store or something that I create and I can have a way to aim

at its target. For this thing, God himself is the boss, and as for me, I am a servant. Tomorrow, another man will help me. So in that way, he didn't say anything else. So it's true, that, now people have different perspectives or thoughts about all this work of Bible translation. But I see that the thing that is starting to happen now, I think that it's aiming at a good target, and that with this workshop, it hit the mark. It's continuing to tend towards this target.

So I probably don't have a lot to say about many other things, but this: that regarding training, I say that training is a really important thing in which we are looking to have representatives from each language who correspond to the translators for whatever area: literacy, Scripture engagement, and we will gather them all at the same time, connect them together, and these people, they will attract other people to come and we will work together now. Because now at this time still, because there are different backgrounds, different levels of understanding, and they themselves realize that when they are at this kind of place, with their backgrounds like they are, and they increase their knowledge like this, okay then they are, well, they are determining where they will go. But now, it's still wrong. So then, I'm not saying that it's our work to make all people to become Christians, but I think that we are one hand that helps. And in this way all of us will bring about a good thing, in order that God can receive a big reputation.