

The BHAG Missionary Conundrum: Is Measuring Progress on our BHAGs Causing a Full Circle in Modern Missions? — A Look Back at Vision 2025.

Are church and mission leaders misusing and abusing our Big Hairy Audacious Goals (BHAG)? This BHAG concept was first introduced in the book *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (Jim Collins and Jerry Porras, 1994). Collins and Porras commonly abbreviate it as BHAG, pronounced "bee hag."¹

A BHAG is a long-term goal that is bold and compelling enough to inspire employees of an organization to get behind it and act on it. We Board members need to ask ourselves: Are the missionaries who are tasked with implementing our Board-adopted BHAGs on board with us?"

Vision 2025 is a prime example of this conundrum. Vision 2025 was adopted by the Wycliffe family of organizations and a number of other mission organizations. Vision 2025 began as a question of what it would take to get Bible translations **started** in every language by 2025, but was then quickly adopted as a goal, a BHAG. While approved by Boards and administrators, it was met with eye rolls and remarks like, "That's impossible!" by many of the field missionaries. These same field missionaries were then tasked by administrators with endless rounds of meetings to somehow innovate new ways of working to accomplish Vision 2025, and to do so without additional people to help meet this new, audacious goal.

These meetings took us missionaries from the work we had already committed to, while simultaneously communicating to our sending churches and families that the work we were already doing would speed up because we had plans to implement the Vision 2025 BHAG. My observation as a field missionary, is that Vision 2025 frustrated those of us tasked to implement it, because we had to do more with less time and fewer people. This caused a sense of personal failure on the field, which did little to motivate the missionaries.

Further, Vision 2025 was used as a fundraising tool, where millions of dollars were raised by home organizations by making it look as though simply applying more money across the board could accomplish the task at hand. But a major component was lacking. That component? A sufficient number of people to do the work. During this time, the number of younger missionaries coming to the field continued to drop. One solution that has helped, that of training national partners to carry the work, is a useful strategy in some locations where national partners have greater education and skills, but lack funding.

But where I work, and in areas of the world with the greatest remaining translation needs, the national education system leaves those of us working with Christian adults who lack skills. We teach basic concepts like telling time, typing and basic computer skills, biblical stewardship of money, and how to withstand the significant family pressures to misuse money from mission, NGO and governments. Because the villages and communities struggle to manage both family and community money, the result is an inability and despair to financially support development and mission work.

I have spent 32 years on the ground in the field in Papua New Guinea, where the greatest language needs remain, and where the systemic and cultural issues thwart our best attempts at just funding the nationals.” My amazing national team members want and value the protection that expat missionary partnerships give them. They are asking me, “Where is the next generation of missionaries that will help us continue to reach our goal of having a complete Bible in our language?” They value cross cultural teams, but want to work face to face.

Has the race to accomplish the Vision 2025 BHAG caused us to cut corners? Cameron Townsend, the founder of SIL and Wycliffe, dreamed in the 1950s of having a Bible in each of what they estimated at that time to be the remaining 2,000 languages without Bibles. Today, adding sign languages, the estimate is now upwards of 7,388 total languages. Approximately 544 languages have not had a translation project started.

But there are underlying problems: Over the last decade, I have watched as varying classification methods were used to tighten and reduce the number of remaining languages in need of Scripture. According to one agency in Papua New Guinea, the number of new translations needed has dropped from 335 to 220 languages in under 10 years. Some of the 115 languages removed were due to creating language translation cluster projects, or missionaries doubling the languages they would try to work with. A few more were independent projects, but from my observation, over half were dropped due to application of new counting metrics.

The country of Papua New Guinea has approximately 832 languages, where in 70 years of diligent work, agencies have completed 287 written New Testaments. However, now it feels like the Alaska gold rush as agencies are now advertising they will start work in blocks of 50, 80 and 230 new languages! Thus Vision 2025 could be declared “accomplished.” But the most concerning factor is the change of actual work methodology in some agencies. Instead of the goal being a written translation book and recording of the book, they have moved the goal posts to change to oral Bible storytelling. These languages are considered reached, and are ticked off the list once a language has a small set of oral stories. How will they know when they start a language? At least one agency counts “starts” when a computer tablet is handed to a speaker of the not yet started language. Then these nationals come to me asking for help with their tablet while the agency that handed them the tablet advertises “300 starts this year!” I’ve noticed that all these tablet recipients I’ve had contact with already have a completed New Testament in their language done by other agencies. This sure does not add up!

Have we come full circle? No longer is the translation goal to translate a New Testament or the complete Bible, but 5-15 Bible stories developed in a workshop are now considered enough Scripture to sustain the faith of a people group.

I would like to challenge my fellow mission leaders to please revisit and take a closer look at mission history. In 1939, when Joy Ritterhoff founded what is now Global Recordings

Network, Joy set it up not to teach oral storytelling, but to record the stories on records, (the equivalent today are phone APPs). Today, many of the translation workshops attempting to tick off the languages yet to be started are training less than a handful of people to orally recount the translated portions. But audio recordings of stories are remarkably easier. Perhaps some of these agencies changing to adopt an oral approach in order to demonstrate rapid Progress need to just close their missions and give their staff and funds to GRN, who have 86 years of experience with recording stories, and are now in 6546 of the 7388 languages (842 left to go).

After living through this conundrum, my conclusion is that, while I am cheering GRN to complete their recordings in the remaining languages, those agencies whose focus is on actual Bible translation need to quit moving goal posts and changing rules and metrics; we need to stay on the long and hard, non-microwavable course, and to continue to translate Bibles and disciple people during the process. We all need to recognize that the easiest languages are now completed, but the hardest languages, which are least accessible also often have the lowest education levels, are still before us. They need more than a rushed job. They want and need long term missionaries to help them. Who will go?

Tyndale Bible Translators (TBT) was founded because of the desire to see a Bible translation in use" in every language which needs it. Some previously translated New Testaments were of poor enough quality that the local communities and churches rejected their New Testaments. These people need a New Testament revision, and other small language communities who cannot sponsor the work themselves still want a full Bible. TBT is focused on revisions of previously unused New Testaments and translating Old Testaments. TBT is not in the growing group of agencies attempting to do new language starts.

I would encourage translation-focused ministry boards and mission leaders to stop trying to develop BHAGs to raise money. This is especially gross negligence when our sending churches and the missionary-supporting community are misled into thinking that money alone is enough to swiftly accomplish the BHAG. Instead, we need to focus on the goals of God's heart as we work to add and celebrate each saved soul, and each clear and accurate Scripture portion added to His Kingdom.

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