

JAARS **SPEEDING THE WORD TRANSCRIPT**

Speaker
David Pickens

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Interviewer
Arthur Lightbody

Primary Topic(s)
Colombia, cluster approach to Bible translation

Other Topics
Chet Bitterman

Location Discussed
Bogotá and Lomalinda, Colombia

People Group (if named)
Basurudó, Baudó, Chamí, Ependa, Tadó

Announcer:

Welcome to *Speeding the Word*, coming to you from the JAARS Center in Waxhaw, North Carolina, where JAARS speeds Bible translation for all people. And now our host Arthur Lightbody.

Lightbody:

We're talking with David Pickens today, a Wycliffe member, a Bible translator and consultant. We are going to find out exactly what he does. You are here with your wife, Penelope, and I understand you just returned from taking a son over to Wheaton to start college. That's pretty exciting. We are getting acquainted here; can you tell us how you came to be part of Wycliffe?

Pickens:

The first time I went to Colombia, it wasn't as a translator, it was as a trombonist—I am a trombonist by profession and by study. About the same time as I signed my contract to play in the orchestra in Colombia, I read in the newspaper of the kidnapping of a man named Chet Bitterman. At that time I wasn't a Christian, and I was absolutely clueless as to what a Bible translator was doing in Colombia. But nonetheless I was very intrigued, because this man was an American who eventually would be killed in Colombia. With eagerness I followed this story; with eagerness I planned my subsequent departure for Colombia.

Upon arrival it was the first time that I heard the gospel. I think that being overseas produced tenderness in my life, and I was ready to listen. But my roommate from the orchestra—who was also from Philadelphia, a cellist named Richard—shared the gospel with me after he had heard it, when he went to play a concert in the Wycliffe center at Lomalinda. So for about six months I had time to really ponder the truth of this gospel, but I couldn't bring myself to make any sort of profession of faith. I just didn't know how to go about doing that. In the springtime of 1982, when the orchestra would go to the town of Popayán, there the orchestra played, as a series of concerts, some sacred music. And instead of my taking part of any of that, I was in this little clinic—a little clinic in the town of Popayán—with what they thought was appendicitis. I recall lying on the bed there, looking up at the ceiling, thinking, *I need to know this God in a big way, real soon. I cut a deal with Him: "If you get me out of this, I will do whatever it takes to make that profession of faith."*

Following that time in Popayán, I discovered that I didn't have appendicitis; I was just ill. But we had some free time, so Richard and I went to Lomalinda. A young teenager met me on his motorcycle at the airport there and gave me a tour of the center. I saw all the typical things that one might see—the lake, the airstrip and the technical studies building. The tour ended up at the cemetery. And of course, whose grave did I see there but Chet Bitterman's. It was about a year after he died. I recall standing there with the hot sun blazing overhead as I stared down at his grave. This man died so people could hear the Word of God in their own language. It was more than that—it was as if this man had died so that I could hear the gospel in a meaningful way.

It was during that week at Lomalinda that God changed my heart. Richard and I went back to Bogotá, and as we arrived in the capital city, he looked at me and said, "David, you're changed. You're a Christian now, aren't you?" And I said, "Yes." I opened my mouth and professed that Jesus was Lord. So that was the beginning of my life as a new believer. Well Richard and I, with all our excitement and the power of the gospel, decided that the orchestra was going to be our mission field. So we

began an outreach of Bible study and began to invite people. At first it was just the two of us, but the group grew from two to three to four, and by the end of two years we had about 10 people meeting weekly. It was a great encouragement for us in the beginning of our Christian lives to see the power of the gospel in that way.

Lightbody:

Thank you for sharing that. You returned to the States, and then you joined Wycliffe Bible Translators. And you had yet to meet Penelope?

David:

I met Penelope there in the orchestra. She also came to play and, like me, when she first arrived she was not a Christian. But by that time there was a cloud of witnesses to share the gospel with her and live the Christian life before her, and after about three months she too became a Christian. That of course opened up a door for more than a friendship for us, and shortly thereafter we were married. After playing in the orchestra for a time afterwards, we decided it was time to go back to the United States. We had hoped to do there—in the city of New York—what we had done in Bogotá, use music as a vehicle to reach other musicians. So we moved back to New York City and set up shop, but just didn't have peace.

We realized we'd had the unique opportunity to see missions face to face. Not only had we seen missions up close, but we also had seen what the Bible had done in our personal lives, and we decided that perhaps we too could become Bible translators. So we began our series of studies and applications and training, and we returned to Colombia—not as musicians, but as Bible translators to the Tadó people in 1991.

Lightbody:

Were there believers among the Tadó?

David:

One of the reasons we decided to work with the Tadó people was the fact that no one else had ever worked with these people. For a long time it was thought to be a dialect of a neighboring language, Chamí, but in fact a recent survey had revealed that it is a distinct language. That, combined with the reality that there were no subversives—no guerrilla groups in the area—meant that we could actually live with the people and learn their culture and their language.

Lightbody:

Then you did translate Scripture? What was their reaction when Scripture was being translated, in those early days when God's Word was available to them?

David:

There was very little reception in the early days for anything that was the Scriptures. We published a storybook version of the creation, and they said, "Oh, this is a really nice book to have, and we're glad you recorded it for us too, but it's not true. It's just not really the way things are. Let us tell you about how it really is."

So from the beginning, there wasn't very much receptiveness to the gospel or to the Scriptures in their language. But that came through the conversion, primarily, of a man named Luis Sonorio, who with us in the city of Pareda working on the translation of Genesis. We were producing Bible study materials in the book of Genesis. As the course was about to end, he came to me one morning and said, "David, I've had a dream." And for the Tadó, of course, dreams are very significant.

He said, "I've had a dream, and I don't know its meaning. Could you help me

understand it? I dreamt I was walking through the jungle, and I came to a fork in the path, and I heard a voice saying, ‘Luis Seniorio, walk on my path.’”

And I took the opportunity to explain to him this was God calling him, and that God wanted him for His own. All the things we had been talking about before clicked for him. And in that moment he became our brother in Christ. He had a real passion for the gospel and saw the darkness in which his people lived. He would go back and share the gospel and would come back with stories that five, six, seven, eight people—entire families were being saved as they heard the gospel. And so it was through his initiative and through his efforts to disciple others that Christian congregations have since formed among the Tadó.

Lightbody:

That is wonderful. It wasn’t the orchestra; it wasn’t the music ministry, but God had you prepared for that, and Luis was there. God prepared him. Now, I understand there are several languages that are closely related, and there is an approach being done to reach several languages at once. Is that true? You did finish the New Testament translation—is that right?

David:

We did not complete the New Testament translation for the Tadó. We have been working steadily in both Old and New Testament, but we looked around us and saw that there was the Chamí language; there’s the Baudó, the Basurudó and the Epena. For some of these languages there are no translators. And our efforts to recruit other people had come to naught. So we thought, *How can we complete the language program for these groups as well?* Their languages are similar—we sort of understand them. In fact, we have done studies to show that the intelligibility is about 60–80% among these languages. And at the same time we became aware of advances in computer adaptation software that is available now, and so colleague Phil Harms and I got tooled up in using those and have begun what is known a cluster approach. We’re using the Epena language as a source language. Now Phil and Judy have worked over 30 years in the Epena Saija language. They have the New Testament published and all the Old Testament in draft, so we’re using that as the source language. We program the differences between the Epena and the other languages into a computer, relate it all in a dictionary, and through the computer we produce rough drafts in these target languages. Then we can work with young men and women from these different language groups to check the reliability and the naturalness of this translation, edit it so we can proceed for publication, for audio recording.

Lightbody:

Are you finding that they are supportive? Are people stepping forward to help, or do we need to pray for more workers to work with you on this project, David?

David:

We are very excited that through our program that we have in the city of Pareda, we have been able to make contact with the Baudó language. We are in the process beginning to train young men to be the co-translators—the mother-tongue translators in the Baudó language. We’re still trying to make contact with the Basuduró people. ... We’ve just not been able a chance to make contact with them. So we’re praying for God’s time when we might be able to establish contact with them.

Lightbody:

This is something that has very recently begun—when did the cluster begin?

David:

We began this about two years ago, and it's been very gratifying to see how well the software works, so that hopefully we can save a lot of time, and we can produce a better product for these people groups by using this—by adopting this strategy.

Lightbody:

Now, I understand that the Harms of course had furloughs and other things going on, studying the language. We don't want to give the idea that it took 20–30 years to only do the translation, but it took over that period of time to do the Epena?

David:

Yes, that's right—it took about 30 years.

Lightbody:

Now you're looking at about how many to be done in the cluster?

David:

We would like to proceed with about five more years and see how much we can translate and then assess the needs for future translation projects.

Lightbody:

When you left to go to Colombia, you were aware of a certain element of danger. At least, something happened to our friend Chet Bitterman. Was it hard for you as a family to think about actually raising children there? Was it hard for the grandparents? Was it ever a consideration?

David:

We were so full of excitement to be able to live and minister among the Tadó people. We thought we had been very well prepared by SIL and had certainly been given adequate advice regarding security. So we didn't feel we were taking inordinate risks by living with the Tadó people. In fact, our history has born this out; we left at the right time. But certainly it was very difficult for our parents to see us going off to Colombia, no doubt.

Lightbody:

And your children, the ones in middle school and high school, are looking forward to going back in a year?

David:

Yes. They are more or less typical third-culture kids. They've enjoyed many things and many aspects of living here at JAARS, but of course they are very much looking forward to going back to Latin America.

Lightbody:

It is really wonderful how God provides all of these support workers—these friends that are able to listen to God and take these roles as school teachers and many others areas—so it is possible to do the work, isn't it?

David:

It has been such a blessing of Christ. That's right.

Lightbody:

Do you have any other prayer requests or anything more you would like to tell us about? How might we pray for this cluster project?

David:

We would really like to ask prayer that we would be able to make contact with the Basuduró people. We would like to ask prayer for the mother-tongue translators in the Tadó, Chamí and Epena languages, and that we would do a good job training mother-tongue translators in the Baudó language.

Lightbody:

Thank you for your time with us today, David. God bless you and Penelope and your precious family.

David:

It's been a pleasure.

Lightbody:

Have a great day, everyone.

Announcer:

We hope that you have enjoyed *Speeding the Word*. Arthur Lightbody would like to hear from you personally if you are interested in the Bible translation movement. He welcomes your call at 1-704-843-6048. You may look us up on the Web at www.jaars.org.