

JAARS SPEEDING THE WORD TRANSCRIPT

Speaker
Dr. David Ross, president of GIAL

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Interviewer
Arthur Lightbody

Primary Topic(s)
GIAL, a graduate program to train potential Bible translators in applied linguistics and language development

Other Topics
Curriculum, anthropology, sociolinguistics, learning a language without a teacher

Location Discussed
Asia, Africa

People Group (if named)
N/A

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 are speaking today with Dr. David Ross, president of the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics here in Dallas, Texas. I am in his office right now.

Ross:

Good afternoon.

Lightbody:

Let's learn a little bit about you. Where did you grow up? People may be able to detect that you really don't have a Texas accent. What brought you to Dallas?

Ross:

I wasn't born in Texas. I was born in New Zealand and grew up in New Zealand. I grew up in a Christian family, but not one where we seriously considered missions. I was a believer as a teenager, but I had another career. I had a career in engineering and first came to this country as a graduate student in engineering. When I finished my degree in Pennsylvania, I joined the faculty of civil engineering of a state university in Ohio.

Lightbody:

What took you from that? You were teaching at a university, and God called you to Bible translation. How did that happen?

Ross:

It wasn't something I was expecting to do. My wife and I were quite happily settled in Ohio, and I was enjoying my engineering career. We had also joined a suburban church that had been going for many years and was not one that sent missionaries out regularly. When I first went to this church, they asked me if I would teach them something from Scripture, because I'd been part of Bible studies before. But I hadn't tried to teach, and so I wasn't all that keen on the idea. And they pressured me, so very quickly I was teaching an adult Sunday school and a men's Bible study as well.

But I didn't know where to start in teaching Scripture, so I looked in my Bible, and Matthew was the first book of the New Testament. So I said, "That's a good place to start." And I noticed my Bible was divided into chapters, so I said, "Well, chapters have to be good for something." So I said, "We'll study Matthew 1 the first week, Matthew 2 the second week and Matthew 3 the third week." It's not a great idea—you spend all of the first week talking about the lineage of Jesus. But I didn't know anything at all about teaching Scripture, so that is the way we started. I don't know how many others have been teaching in Sunday school—if you are teaching on Sunday morning, I've found on Saturday afternoon you pull out all the commentaries, and you try to figure out what it is you are going to say on Sunday morning.

We were working our way through the book of Matthew, and I vividly remember one Saturday afternoon I was sitting on the sofa with my commentaries all around me, preparing the last chapter of Matthew, chapter 28. I read the passage we call "The Great Commission": "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. ..." I was studying this passage—it was Jesus speaking to the 11 disciples after the crucifixion and the resurrection and before the ascension, when He met His disciples beside the

sea. I was looking at this passage and wondering who Jesus was talking to. Was He talking to just those 11 disciples, or was He talking to believers everywhere, now? If he was talking to the 11 disciples it was a historical story and I could forget it. But if he was talking to us now, I couldn't. You see, my Bible doesn't say, "Go if you feel like it." It doesn't say, "Go if you can't find a better job." I had a good one—I didn't need another one if it just says, "Go." Well, God and I fought for six months over that verse, and as soon as He convinced us that that verse was for us, I ended up resigning my job in engineering and then moved to Asia as a Bible translator.

Lightbody:

Can you tell us about the translation involvement that you've had overseas?

Ross:

Oh yes! We were involved in a New Testament translation project that was completed in 1998 and has since been used quite effectively in the language group, so there are a number of believers now. It was a great privilege to sit down with people who had not been exposed to these kinds of concepts before and work through with them.

One example—I hadn't realized how much our understanding of Scripture depends on our understanding of nautical terms. These people lived 500 miles from the sea, and they'd never seen the sea. They didn't have a word for a boat or an island. And yet you read the last two chapters of the Book of Acts, [about] Paul being taken in chains from Israel to Rome to face charges before the Roman Emperor. It is full of nautical terms. They didn't have a clue as to what they were, so one of the things it says was they took Paul down to the shore and put him on a boat and sailed around the lee side of Cyprus.

The native speakers of the language who were helping me asked, "What's Cyprus?" I told them it was an island, and I used a word from the national language. And they asked, "What's an island?" And I thought, well I'm not quite sure—in New Zealand we had thousands of islands.

"Well, it is a bit of dirt that comes up out of the sea."

And they looked at me and asked, "Why?"

"Well, I'm not sure why."

But they had no idea what the right questions were to ask. Those concepts were totally unknown. They did not have a word for a rudder, an anchor or taking a sounding, or any of those kinds of things. So the process of translation becomes quite challenging. And fun, when you have to express these concepts that are unknown in a culture.

Lightbody:

A lot of people tell us, David, "Well, better you do it than I—I can't do it. You are so bright; you can do it." Is that true, that they can't do it?

Ross:

No, it is certainly not. There was nothing further from my background either. My background was in math, science and engineering, so I had no idea about how languages worked. But there are training programs that we can help—someone certainly needs to be able to think, but beyond that we can teach a lot of the concepts that are involved [in language learning].

Lightbody:

Tell us about the school you head up—GIAL.

Ross:

It stands for Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics. It is an accredited, degree-granting institution here in Dallas, Texas, where we offer master's degrees to those who are training to be Bible translators. Some are training to be literacy experts. Some are into sociolinguistics and language survey. We train people to be translation consultants; we train people to help coordinate multiethnic teams. God seems to be raising up teams for His work at this point, and we praise God for that. These teams are being formed from people from all sorts of different backgrounds. Christian believers coming everywhere, from Korea to Britain, to the United States, to South America, to Africa. We all have different cultural backgrounds, and encouraging us to work together as teams is quite a challenge.

Lightbody:

We didn't say we were going to talk about this, but students today, when they go out in this Bible translation movement under Wycliffe Bible Translators or other mission groups ... they are doing it in different ways. And that is what you are alluding to. We used to picture somebody going out and learning a language and doing a translation—kind of by themselves, as it were.

Ross:

Yes. When we went out a number of years ago, it was assigned one language, one team. So the husband and wife, or two single people, would go work on a language together. But much more now, they are working in teams and sometimes in multi-translation projects at the same time, where languages that might be related or spoken in the same areas are all working on different translations into different languages at the same time, using the same consultant help.

Lightbody:

Does that affect how you teach students today?

Ross:

Oh yes, it definitely does. We emphasize partnership skills and team-building skills in a very different way [than] what we would have 25 years ago. It is exciting, though, because the students are excited about this—we live in a new generation where people expect to be part of the global community.

Lightbody:

I was going to ask you if students are different today and what they are like. You've answered that.

Ross:

It is fashionable to run down the younger generation, but I am convinced God is raising up a special generation, a generation that knows what globalization is all about. It knows how the world functions together in a very different way. They expect to be part of teams. They expect things to be working together toward achieving the glory of God.

Lightbody:

While we are talking about it, can you tell us a few of the actual subjects a student might take in the master's program?

Ross:

It is a graduate program, but many of our students—including myself—come from nonlinguistic backgrounds, so we do run a senior-level certificate in applied linguistics that brought people like me up to an equivalent of an undergraduate degree in linguistics before we can start. It is a six-month program where we teach students the beginning phonetics, that is, the sounds of language. The language we worked in had some unusual sounds, including a (slurping sound). It is not very common in the languages of the world, but there are some. We teach students how

to recognize and write down, using an international phonetic alphabet, the sounds of a language. There are many hundreds and thousands of sounds that can be made in human languages.

We teach them the beginnings of grammar. Many of us remember our English grammar. The grammar of different languages varies. In English, we are used to starting off with the subject, then the verb and then the object. “Peter kicked the cat.” Or, “Peter picked up the cat.” In many languages of the world, it doesn’t work that way. Sometimes the verb is at the end. The language we worked on in Asia was like that.

There is phonetics, grammar, and then the sounds of language interact with each other in another science we call “phonology,” which we study in order to reduce the number of sounds that have to be written in a language and make the alphabet easier to understand. Then we teach courses in learning another language when there isn’t a teacher. Many of the languages our graduates are working in aren’t even written down yet, so there aren’t any teachers or lesson books. How do you learn a language when there is no teacher and no grammar book to work from?

There are courses in anthropology and in what we call sociolinguistics—helping to understand some of the cultural background that language speakers bring.

Lightbody:

We are talking with Dr. David Ross, the president of GIAL, the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics in Dallas, Texas, telling us what is involved in training students. Have you had students come back and tell you, or email you, “Dr. Ross—it worked!”

Ross:

Oh yes, the GIAL has been in operation now for about 100 years, and there have been over 900 students through here who are now serving with about 25 different mission organizations in 60 different countries. We are just delighted to be able to serve the body of Christ in different ways. Yes, we hear all sorts of good stories.

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of being with one of our alumni who was part of a cluster project in Nigeria, working together in helping different languages begin translation projects there. And what a privilege that is, to work alongside God’s special servants.

Lightbody:

What is the Web site?

Ross:

The website is www.gial.edu.

Lightbody:

Well, I’ve been here in your office, and I’ve seen some literature highlighting what some of the students are doing, and I have seen the brochures. Of course, it is all on the Web site too, but I came across your newsletter and you had an interesting story there. I wonder if you would share that.

Ross:

I was boarding an aircraft in the northern United States, getting ready to come back home, and the gentleman sitting in the seat next to me was quite excited. It happened there was another passenger on the plane named Ted Nugent, a man I didn’t know, but apparently he was a rock star who became an outdoorsman and has quite a following. He was a passenger in first class. My friend in the seat next to me was wondering how he could arrange a future meeting with him, and he got an autograph of Ted Nugent to give to his son. He was busy inviting Ted Nugent

to come on a hunting expedition with him, and all these kinds of things that were ways he could share his good fortune and set up some appointments for future meeting. And I thought to myself as I watched this friend of mine, wouldn't it be great to get so excited about meeting Jesus? And that is what it is all about. That's why I am a Bible translator, because I've seen it. I've seen what happens when people meet Jesus in their own lives.

Lightbody:

Thank you for your time today.

Ross:

It is a privilege. What a wonderful opportunity to be with you. Thanks very much.

Lightbody:

God bless you everyone.

Announcer:

We hope that you have enjoyed *Speeding the Word*. Arthur Lightbody would love to hear from you personally if you are interested in becoming part of 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.