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Inuit people receive their own Bible translation

Isabella R. Moyer | May. 10, 2012 NCR Today

The Inuit people will now have access to the entire Bible in Inuktitut [1], the most widely spoken Aboriginal tongue in Canada?s Arctic.

The translation project began in 1978, with the New Testament published in 1991, and the Old Testament translation recently completed. The $1.7 million Inuktitut project was co-sponsored by the Canadian Bible Society and the Anglican Church of Canada.

The work was spear-headed by Rev. Eugene A. Nida [2], considered the father of modern Bible translation. Rev. Jonah Allooloo, an Inuk priest and canon of the Anglican Church of Canada worked on the project from the start.

Nida, who died in September 2011, introduced the concept of ?functional equivalence? rather than literal translation. He believed that truly accessible translations can only be done by native speakers who know not only the language, but the idioms, thought processes and culture of their people. The translations should read naturally while remaining faithful to the original meaning and message.

In the past, translations were done by missionaries. Though they learned the language, the literal translations were often stilted and awkward.

The challenges of language with the Inuktitut Bible were many. How do you translate a desert reality into the beauty of the Arctic, with its treeless expanse of snow and ice?

Some words were translated phonetically, and gaps were filled with numerous footnotes and explanations. ?Shepherd? was translated into the same word used for someone who tends a dog team.

Nida was also involved in the translation of the Good News Bible, popular in the 1970s. I remember this Bible well. We still have a dog-eared version sitting on our shelf. Scripture purists tended to put down the simplified, colloquial English in this translation, but it was actually read (and re-read) by many.

To know that so much energy and effort is being put forward to make God?s word accessible to all is truly a good news story. The care and respect shown for local cultures and languages embraces our global reality, rather than enforcing homogeneity.

Perhaps there is a lesson to be learned.

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Links:
[1] http://prairiemessenger.ca/05_09_2012/RNSInuk_05_09_12.html

[2] http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/04/us/04nida.html