

2019 in Retrospect

Dear and good friends,

Greetings to you from Wake Forest, North Carolina.

The schedule eased up for us a bit in 2019. For the first time since my Ohio State days, we spent more time in the US this past year than overseas.

It was a good year. 2019 marked the 100th Anniversary of William Cameron Townsend (Uncle Cam's) arrival in Guatemala to sell Bibles in Spanish only to find that the rural people there didn't read nor speak Spanish—just Kaqchikel, a Mayan Indian language. He was asked by one Indian man, "If your God is so smart, why doesn't he speak our language?" This question has reverberated through the years as a call to ministry, one that Nancy and I answered back in 1977, two years after we were married. Many of you reading this have accompanied us in this journey and we are deeply grateful to you all.

Uncle Cam took the next ten years to learn the language, develop an alphabet, help build a local literature, teach literacy and translate the New Testament. He was followed in this ministry by thousands of young people who traced his steps to Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, Papua New Guinea, Nigeria and around the world, and under all kinds of conditions.

Uncle Cam went on to found three organizations to institutionalize his vision for training and for keeping his charges safe and happy. SIL International is a Christian academic organization that deals with the technical / linguistic side of the work. SIL was founded in 1934, while Wycliffe Bible Translators is a missions organization aimed at recruiting and fund raising to enable each person in the world to understand the Message of the Gospel in his or her heart language. Wycliffe was founded in 1942. SIL has tended historically to relate to academic organizations, universities and governments. Wycliffe tends to relate to churches and missions.

Uncle Cam also founded JAARS (Jungle Aviation and Radio Service) to handle the "hardware" of Bible translation—airplanes, helicopters, computers, information technology and media.

Uncle Cam founded these three organizations and they are still going. Pretty impressive.

Nancy and I trained for SIL and ended up graduating from the University of Texas at Arlington with MA's in linguistics. We went to Jungle Camp (also pre-envisioned by Uncle Cam) and then we headed to Guatemala with Elisa soon to be born. Nancy and I (and Elisa) arrived in Guatemala in August of 1979. We had the privilege in 1986 to speak (in Spanish) as representatives of Wycliffe at the dedication of some Sunday-School classrooms built to commemorate Uncle Cam's work among the

Kaqchikel churches. What goes around comes around. Uncle Cam got the ball rolling and we were able to see some of the fruit of his vision.



This year, I taught in Lima, Peru in March, as I had for the last thirteen years. I was involved in two courses this time—phonology and semantics. These have ended up being my favorite courses to teach. Phonology deals with the sound systems of languages and semantics deals with meaning.

Linguistics basically deals with why languages are the way they are. Interestingly, as different as languages sound, they are surprisingly similar in many ways. If we can teach the notions that are universal among languages, students can have a head start to learning and analyzing ANY language that they come up against.

In August, I got quite a surprise. As most of you know, I am burdened by parkinson's. It has no cure and it has loads of seemingly unrelated symptoms. But one thing that all caregivers and doctors say, is that intense exercise is good for sufferers. So, as usual, I've taken things to extremes. One of my good college buddies, Dave and his sister both suffer from parkinson's. Mine is not genetic, but probably environmental—like being exposed to childhood in the 50's and 60's. I can no longer run, as I have my whole life, so I bought a good bike and I've been riding almost daily for 18 months. Dave coerced me into riding with him and a team of family and friends on a three-peak Colorado mountain route. A few days before the ride, our team got together for a twenty-mile warm up. As we adjusted helmets and

filled water bottles, the team leader said, “Oh, here comes our last team member.” I looked at the guy walking up the driveway and said to myself, “Wow, does that guy ever look like Isaac.” He came up to me and took off his sunglasses and said, “Hi Dad, I’m riding with you guys.” I was completely overwhelmed. Isaac had bought a good bike and taken up serious riding eight months before the ride and worked out pretty much daily to be ready for the Copper Triangle. I hadn’t the slightest idea. It was a highpoint in my life. Thank you, Isaac.



In September, Nancy and I returned to Guatemala to see friends and to help celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the Mam New Testament.

We had a wonderful time with representatives from our two main supporting churches, Parkside in Cleveland and Grace in Ashland. We were especially glad to have John Teevan join us for the festivities. John was the pastor who married us back in 1975, and he and our home church commissioned us for the work of linguistics, literacy and Bible translation with Wycliffe two years later.

There were some 400 people who attended the Mam celebration. They heard from Samuel about progress on the Mam Old Testament that is now undergoing final revision.



There were Mam-language dramas, women’s choirs, Bible memory and lots of music and reading.

It was a day when Mam was

So what's ahead for 2020? Certainly there will be lots of puns regarding 2020 vision, especially for non-profit organizations that are funded for their vision.

I am working on a book on the history of written Mam. Why would I do such a thing? The reason is that Mam is one of the great indigenous languages of the New World with over a half million speakers. It has been written for many centuries, and by showing and promoting this, people are rightfully proud. And when they are proud of their language, they choose to read and write it. And when they read the Mam Scriptures in their OWN LANGUAGE, it comes to life. So why wouldn't I write such a treatise? What the Mam writing book does is contribute to a context where Mam literacy is normal and expected, as well as being taught and enjoyed in the schools and churches, homes and markets. And when people read, good things happen, especially when they read the Bible and understand it.

2020 promises to be rough. It's leap year so that will add a day to the confusion. It's Olympic year, and election year (in the US), and who knows how many elections will occur in Britain with Brexit at stake? There's impeachment to consider. And global warming. And driverless cars. Life is complicated.

People ask about us retiring. I plan to work until my birthday in 2021. We've done some financial counseling and research and that seems best. Plus, that will give us time to finish several big projects, the Mam writing book and a synopsis in Spanish of my book on Mam culture—as well as a Mam version of the same book.

We also hope to visit a few college campuses on Wycliffe's behalf, looking for people interested in Bible translation.



A few of the Mam people (photos by Tedd Lodes; Literacy Evangelism International)

Blessings to you all now and throughout 2020. And thanks for your prayers and support. It has been a long haul, but still exciting.

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