



*THE MESSAGE BOARD*  
*A Newsletter from*  
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Personal Reflections

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### International Literacy

On September 8, 2010, I represented American Baptist Churches USA at the UNESCO International Literacy Day (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization) where Laura Bush spoke highlighting the global literacy challenge.

One cannot adequately speak of world literacy without acknowledging the contribution of the church and the modern missionary movement. Propelled by the desire for every person to be able to read and understand the Bible in her/his own language, the church has been a major factor in the growth of world literacy.

The contribution of Frank Laubach and the Laubach Literacy Method which was used extensively in church ministries cannot be underestimated in its effectiveness in combating illiteracy. I also think of the countless American Baptist churches that have offered English as a second language classes to the multiple waves of immigrant communities. I think of our many colleges and universities. All of these efforts are to be celebrated!

Those who have given their lives to translating the Bible, however, are to be especially celebrated. Their commitment to making the Bible accessible to all has meant, in many cases, creating written language for thousands of people and groups whose language was only oral. Beginning with William Carey, the English Baptist shoemaker who planted the seed of the modern missionary movement and served in India, Baptist missionaries have been instrumental in this effort.

Traveling through North East India and Burma, and other countries of the Golden Triangle, I became keenly aware of the particular contribution of American Baptist missionaries to innumerable tribal groups. Beginning with Adoniram Judson, all the way through Paul and Elaine Lewis, as well as Donald Deer, we have been God's hands and feet in translating the Bible in order to share God's word. Such work towards translation isn't just about getting the words right. It is also the work of taking concepts which may not even be present in a culture and communicating them accurately and appropriately. Symbols in the Hebrew or Christian story may not be present in other cultures. When one is seeking to faithfully translate Holy Scripture, one must be humbly dependent upon the Spirit.

Another important contribution that I had never before thought of is the preservation of culture and identity because of the gift of a written language. Many of the tribal cultures in the Americas, Africa, Asia and Micronesia are alive and vibrant today because Christian missionaries created their written languages which enabled them to preserve their culture. Contrary to a popular image of Christian mission destroying indigenous cultures, it has actually helped preserve them while transforming these cultures as it did centuries earlier with tribal groups in Europe.

The church's commitment to world literacy through its emphasis on education and Bible translation is one of its great unsung contributions to human welfare.

*American Baptists Serving as the Hands and Feet of Christ*

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