



Season 13: Episode 7 | Jeff Green | Why Does Bible Translation Matter?

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'm going to be your guide for today's episode.

Today, journalist Lorna Dueck is in conversation with CBS's own Jeff Green. Dr. Jeff Green is the Vice President of Scripture Translation at the Canadian Bible Society, and today we are delighted to understand how the Bible became so important to his life that his entire career has been shaped by Bible translation work. Jeff and his family spent 11 years in East Asia where he served with Wycliffe and Summer Institute of Linguistics in a Bible translation project, navigating as a linguistics and translation consultant.

He taught linguistics at both the undergraduate and graduate levels for Canada Institute of Linguistics in Langley, BC. His leadership experience includes serving as language and culture learning coordinator and as the coordinator of a Bible translation community of practice focused on the Himalayan region. Since joining CBS, Jeff has been a translation consultant on projects such as Plains Cree, Inuktitut, Mohawk, Blackfoot, Punjabi and more.

He enjoys teaching others the things he has had the opportunity to learn and helping others with the technical aspects of Bible translation. Jeff earned a Doctor of Ministry degree in Bible translation from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts and he and his family live in Oshawa, Ontario. Enjoy this conversation.

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Lorna Dueck: Well, Dr. Jeff Green, your role as Vice President of Scripture Translation for Canadian Bible Society involves getting so many things right. Start off by telling us what your role in translation oversight involves.

Jeff Green: So, we do a handful of different things in our department here. We have some translation projects in Canada that we are directly involved with. We have a handful of translation projects overseas that are being implemented by other Bible societies and we at CBS have partnered with them to connect Canadian donors with the work going on overseas and our department plays a role in monitoring the project and helping our communications people communicate good information about the projects to the donors here.

We also, in terms of our domestic projects, we typeset. So, when the translation is ready to be published, the Bible typesetter is part of my department as well and that gets the text out of our software and into a book that can be printed. We also share texts digitally as well.

So, partners like YouVersion, others like that get our texts and that's our department's job to get them to them.

Lorna Dueck: So, tell us though about just before translation work begins, where did your discovery of the Bible begin for you?

Jeff Green: Oh, for me, yeah. So, I grew up in the church is a good way to say it.

My parents still attend the church that I grew up in and when I was growing up, my grandparents did too and my great-grandparents had helped found the church. You know, there was a photo of them with the shovel in the ground and all that. So grew up surrounded by family at church.

Like it was just a part of what we did. So, it was the family culture and it's a convention Baptist church that I grew up in. So, the Bible plays a significant role there and so I grew up thinking of the Bible as, you know, a really important book.

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This is God's book. It's God's word. It's how we hear from God.

It's how we learn how to live the way He wants us to live, and it was fascinating. I guess as a sort of know-it-all teenager, you know, I really enjoyed learning about the Bible. Discovering all this interesting ancient world and stuff that just, you know, wasn't common knowledge, I guess.

Lorna Dueck: And so, when did you decide, I think, you know, you're a teenager, I'd like the Bible to become a career?

Jeff Green: Yeah, well not quite as a teenager. Like I enjoyed Bible study. I was as much of a, you know, Bible nerd as you could be as a just a teenager, you know, youth group kid.

But it was when I was at university, I started out studying math. I did a math degree at Waterloo and along the way had to take 10 non-math courses, you know, so we end up well-rounded. And I had enjoyed languages enough in high school and had the opportunity to study Biblical Greek and Hebrew and just thought, well, that will help me study the Bible better.

Why don't I try that? Loved it. Really, like, so in love with the Biblical languages. I was that weird kid in Greek class who actually enjoyed being there.

So many of my classmates did not, right? And so many pastors had to take Greek as opposed to got to take Greek. And I remember one day walking from Greek class to calculus, thinking about how much I'd enjoyed Greek and how much I wasn't looking forward to calculus. And maybe God was trying to tell me something.

Lorna Dueck: Oh, my goodness. And so, what happens next? How do you journey into the mission world? It's quite different than math. Although language is, I think there's a musical brain connected there.

Jeff Green: 100 percent!

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Lorna Dueck: Yeah. But how did you then begin to a journey into the missional world of the Bible?

Jeff Green: Well, it started with discovering that you could actually, you know, do Greek for a living. But that was, well, that was one thing people did.

And two, that it was a thing that was needed. So, I found out about Wycliffe Bible Translators, that they were an organization that recruited Bible translators and sent them over, trained them, sent them overseas to get involved in translation projects. So, I started corresponding with them about, well, what would this look like? And in Canada, they have a training program that starts with a summer of linguistics classes and then continues on depending on what path you take.

So, I took the summer between my third and fourth years of university, went out to BC and enrolled in their summer training course just to give it a try. In my head, I thought, well, I'm going to give God a chance to talk me into Bible translation. So, I took these linguistics classes and loved every minute of it.

Like I couldn't wait to get to my homework, which was a new experience, right? That I just loved the thing I was studying so much. I couldn't get enough of it. And then we'd have chapel services, you know, once a week or something where speakers, missionaries, you know, from serving in various parts of the world would be hanging around and they'd come and tell us their stories.

So those stories were quite impactful as well. So, I found out that there was a need in the world for Bible translation, that lots didn't have it, meaning lots of people didn't have access to the Word of God in a language that communicated well to them. I discovered the need and I discovered that I was good at it.

And so, you know, if that's not a calling, I don't know what is.

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Lorna Dueck: And how does this impact your family life? Tell us about your life as a young student who becomes a husband, a father. How does this all affect your journey?

Jeff Green: Well, I don't think my parents were thrilled to hear that, you know, I was going to go overseas.

And, you know, Wycliffe is an organization where staff have to fundraise their own salaries. And I wasn't thrilled about that idea myself. But, you know, my dad being practical thought about and expressed to me that, you know, is that really realistic to be able to raise sufficient amount to, you know, raise a family on and whatnot, just from donations.

And so, some good practice. He was he was right. Idealistic young person.

I, you know, didn't take that as seriously as I probably could have. But, you know, it takes idealistic young people to go off and make decisions like that, I think.

So, my girlfriend at the time had actually experienced a call to missions before I had. And that was part of my motivation for exploring all this as well. We did get married, went through Wycliffe's training program, went overseas, had our first child just before going overseas.

So, he was about one when we went overseas, had two more while we were there. So, I mean, family, you know, my kids grew up not seeing their grandparents as often.

Lorna Dueck: And which country were you in with Wycliffe?

Jeff Green: I was in China.

Lorna Dueck: China!

Jeff Green: It had its challenges. It was more open in those days, but not open. But certainly, it's a harder place to be now.

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Lorna Dueck: And God deeply disciplined you in that difficult calling, didn't he?

Jeff Green: Yeah. Like you do learn to when you're when you're a missionary in sort of a faith mission, where you're reliant on donations, you're relying on God to provide for you. I mean, obviously, when you're when you're salaried, God provides for you through your organization that way too. And you can always see God's provision, however you make your living.

But it seems more direct when it's really out of our control. And it's just up to God prompting people's hearts to send in those checks or sign up.

So, learning to trust God in that way was stretching. But, you know, it was hard at times, not so hard at other times, but it worked. It did it for 16 years with Wycliffe, 11 of them overseas.

Lorna Dueck: And what do you actually do overseas? Do you sit with local people trying to understand dialect. What do you do?

Jeff Green: Yeah, so language learning is the first part, language and culture learning, had to learn Chinese, and then I had to learn the minority language I was going to work in. And then had to research the needs to clarify them, because no other Bible translators had been around to ask those questions in these villages before. So had to get out to the countryside and check out who understands who. Do the basic linguistic research.

I mean, some of it had been done in the language I worked in, but not from the Bible translation perspective of, does this people group need their own Bible? Or can they use the one from the neighboring dialect or whatever those sorts of questions needed clarifying?

Lorna Dueck: That is actually a great segue. Can people use this Bible or do they need their own? I was thinking about this as I'm not a polyglot. I don't even know any languages other than my English.

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And I was thinking, what if I couldn't read my Bible in my mother tongue? Right? Like if I, if you expected me to read it in French, because after all, we are a bilingual country. And yes, I'm trying to learn French. But I can't imagine reading a French Bible, because it will never be my heart language as a Canadian Anglophone, you know, so tell us about that about deciding, they deserve they need the Bible in their heart language.

Jeff Green: Well, that's exactly it. If the French Bible were the only Bible, you had access to. And in your church, you know, maybe the preaching would be in English and small group discussions and everything, because you're all English speakers, but your Bible is French, and some people understand it. And some don't.

And some really don't, you know, like the challenge, right, that that would be for growing in your faith, you'd be really reliant on other people to tell you what's in the Bible, you wouldn't be able to check it out for yourself. Maybe the people telling you what's in the Bible don't understand it perfectly themselves, because it's not their mother tongue either.

Yeah, all those challenges. And those are sort of very similar challenges and questions faced by a lot of people in a lot of places around the world. So, like, in China, there's a school system where everyone learns Chinese.

In certain minority areas, there are minority language school systems, or at least there were, I don't know if that's still the case. So, the parents could choose to send their children to school in their own language for some of the larger ones or, or the Chinese school system. And so, they might have access to the Chinese Bible, but it's not their language that they use at home, for example.

Lorna Dueck: So what goes on as people lobby for their language in the Bible, their heart language, because now, and let's get into this a bit, you've got a wide variety of First Nations in Canada, wanting it in their language, in their heart language, and they

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have different languages, as our First Nations, how do you decide? How do you decide who gets a Bible in their heart, in their heart language?

Jeff Green: So different organizations approach this question differently. And, it's changed over time, too. So nowadays, local ownership is a value that's shared across most, I would say, of the Bible translation movement.

So, in a sense, we do decide, but in a sense, we don't. We're privileged in Canada and at the Canadian Bible Society to have the resources to respond positively when people come to us with requests. So, there are lists out there of languages that do or don't have the Bible or have this portion or that portion and need, like, who decides who needs the Bible, right? The way we approach that here is, if they want it, then they deserve it.

Like, who are we to say no to that, especially given the history of the church in Canada and its relationship with First Nations people, Indigenous people and their languages, like we owe it to them.

Lorna Dueck: Okay. Tell us about that.

Tell us about being approached by First Nations peoples.

Jeff Green: Well, right. So, if an Indigenous group or even just some speakers of an Indigenous language want the Bible or portions of the Bible or some access to Scripture in their own language, and I love getting those phone calls and it happens.

So, they'll call us up and they'll tell us, you know, that's what they want. And so then we'll have to explore the situation a little, like, is this just one person asking for it and it doesn't represent a community interest or a church priority or are there church and community leaders behind this who would also be interested?

So, we explore the situation. We explore how healthy is the language in the sense of, can we find fluent speakers who will be able to do the translation work? Because we don't speak the languages.

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Its mother tongue translators are the Bible translators.

Lorna Dueck: And do they need to be Christians?

Jeff Green: No, they don't. I generally, I think in our projects they are, but no, I've read some articles where in certain parts of the world, you know, it's been a Muslim being the Bible translator, as long as they're willing and there's all sorts of quality control steps along the way to make sure that what's being translated is, is correct and doesn't represent skewed points of view or non-Christian points of view or whatever.

Yeah, there's, translation in one sense is a linguistic task where you do have to understand the Bible and that's hard. And so that takes training, but non-Christians can understand the Bible, like in that sense, in the sense of what, what was, say, Paul trying to communicate to the Galatians? That's the sort of thing that through training, anyone can learn to get enough of a sense of to translate it into their mother tongue.

Lorna Dueck: Wow.

Okay. So, but then they've got multiple, you've got a word that is used in multiple senses in Bible translations, right? Like you've got in the same book, you might have vapor in Ecclesiastes or wind in Ezekiel, but those meanings can be different in different, how do you figure that out?

Jeff Green: So, it is hard work, like figuring out what something in the Bible means, especially given the distance in time, you know, this is ancient history we're looking at. This is people who spoke languages other than our language and wrote things in languages that aren't ours and have been passed down to us.

Like, so some of us can access the Greek and Hebrew, but your typical mother tongue translator doesn't have that training, at least in the projects I'm most familiar with. So, they have to make use of other resources and there are lots of resources

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available to them. So, you look at lots of different English versions, for example, in the Canadian context, most of the indigenous Bible translators control English just fine.

So, they'll look at lots of different English translations. And then there are things like commentaries, especially commentaries written specifically for Bible translation that bring out, well, in some languages they can't say it this way, it won't make any sense. So, they've done this or they've done this to give them some options.

Lorna Dueck: Or there's the equivalent of Biblical words that I don't think have an equivalent in other languages, like Hades, like Hades. Hell?

Jeff Green: Yeah, though you'd be surprised that some languages happen to have concepts that overlap enough that they use their term. Other ones don't, of course.

And so, some of the hardest ones are actually like concrete objects that don't exist in our world anymore because they were just part of how ancient people did things. I remember in Job, it talked about a threshing sledge at some point, which was some board of wood with, you know, metal things on the bottom that they would use to do something with their fields or threshing grain, right? Like it's some farming tool that was a part of their world and isn't a part of mine, certainly, and probably not a part of anyone's anymore. So, what do you do, right? You either describe the thing with something like that that's about your only option as you describe the thing, right? With animals, like the Inuit aren't going to have a native word for giraffe because giraffes don't live in the Arctic.

So, what do they do? Well, they've probably solved this problem without us before we came along because of their school system. And because nowadays they have access to TV and the internet, and so they'll have some way of talking about giraffes. Now, I don't think giraffes are in the Bible, but, you know, there are other animals that are, that they'll either have ways of talking about or they'll need to borrow a word from a related language or an influential language that enough other people will know.

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Sheep, for example, Lamb of God, in Inuit languages in the Eastern Arctic Inuktitut translation. So, Baffin Island, Nunavut, Northern Quebec, they just borrow the English word sheep, make it sound their way and put their own kind of suffixes on it. But that's what they did for sheep.

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Lorna Dueck: And as you described the geography of Canada, this reminds us that translation is not solo work, right? You are looking for a committee of collective minds that you would find in the believer's community, even far up north, even in an aboriginal community that's asking for a translation in Canada.

Tell us about finding a committee that can actually do it.

Jeff Green: Well, there are all sorts of people involved, from sort of church oversight, where the local churches need to be in the driver's seat because they're the ones who are going to be using the translation. But they're not necessarily the one, you know,

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the pastors aren't the ones necessarily sitting down at the desk to do the translation, but they still have opinions and they need to be on board or nobody's going to use the translation.

So, you'll have some sort of oversight body, hopefully representing all the local churches. We don't just want a Baptist Bible or a Catholic Bible or an Anglican Bible or whatever. It's the Bible, right? So especially in these minority languages where they're not going to have a second translation anytime soon, probably.

Lorna Dueck: So, and explain to us why artificial intelligence is not an adequate translation tool. People just think, oh, just pop this through the machine.

Jeff Green: For major languages, even something like Google Translate works pretty well, right? And there are other tools that maybe work better in some contexts than others.

But those are for languages that have a lot of literature already, you know, scanned into the systems or on the internet, lively discussions on, you know, blogs and whatnot. But for minority languages, that just isn't out there. There might be no other literature or very little in terms of literature out there already.

So, there's nothing for the machines to learn the language from. That said, there are some smart people working on this problem, especially with the new AI tools and large language models and whatnot. So, for example, there's a tool where you can train the AI on a New Testament translation and then give it a shot at drafting parts of your Old Testament and see how it does.

And results are mixed. Some people are very encouraged by the progress. I was at a meeting once where two translators from two different languages had been working with this tool and they had different perspectives on it.

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One said, yes, it saves us tons of time. We still have to, as humans, go over it and fix all its mistakes and make sure it's, you know, what it's supposed to say. But it saved us time on the first draft.

And others said, no, basically with the amount of work we had to do to clean it up, it didn't save us any time, and we could have done that job ourselves. So, there's, you know, the jury's still out, but there are tools out there and, in some situations, they might be a really good choice. There are all sorts of ethical questions around that being raised now, too.

Like, I'm impressed by the quality of discussion going on in the Bible translation world about this. For example, who gets to be the people to write a first draft? Should we give that privilege to a machine? Or is there something about building into the community and discipling the translators in their own depth of knowledge of the Bible that they're then going to be resources in their communities? You know, if all that Bible knowledge is in a machine instead of in the community, that's not good for the church, right? Like, actually, there are all sorts of benefits to having human Bible translators beyond just getting the work done.

Lorna Dueck: That's fascinating because we don't realize how rich a Bible translation committee is to the church community.

And I'm thinking this is maybe a good segue. You have been asked to produce a Punjabi Bible for Canada's Punjabi people. Some say there is revival amongst the Punjabi people towards Christianity in Canada's Punjabi community.

Let's talk about the Punjabi request in Canada. What's underway?

Jeff Green: Right. So, in about, oh, 2017, 2018, some Punjabi pastors in Alberta approached us.

And in Punjabi, there were basically two main Bible translations available to them. One published in the 1950s or 60s that they call the old version, and it traces its roots

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back to the William Carey works a couple hundred years earlier. And then one called the common language version, which was being worked on in the 60s and 70s, came out in the early 80s.

And it's more of a good news style, easier to understand Bible, whereas the old version is much more sort of King James, like harder to understand, more formal of the translation. And the pastors in Canada said, you know, the common language version is great. We love the way it's it expresses things.

People can understand this Bible. We want to share it with our non-Christian relatives and friends and neighbors. But the translation has problems. The one from the 80s that the Bible Society of India published. So, it had problems like whether it was spelling mistakes or awkward grammar, or maybe it was words that made sense back then, but the language has moved on.

Lorna Dueck: Especially in a community which has such a sacred book. Their sacred book, the Bhagavata, is such a literary, it's just a high standard.

Jeff Green: It wasn't the sort of thing they were comfortable handing out to people. So, they asked us to work on a revision, help them clean it up.

They had approached the Bible Society of India. But India is one of these countries that has so many languages. And the Bible Society of India does good work. They've got a solid translation department. But there are so many languages they need to work on a language like Punjabi that already has translations.

You know, unless the Punjabi churches are breaking down their door, calling them every week, they've got other priorities. And fair enough.

So, when we got approached, we went to them and said, well, can we help the Punjabi Christians in Canada revise your translation from India? And they gave us permission to do it. And their translation director came and participated in the launch of that project and the training of the team at the beginning.

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And so, we are coming up now on the publication of the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs, like the typesetting is going on as I speak.

Lorna Dueck: That's very exciting for Canada's Punjabi community.

Jeff Green: Well, and it's the same language that they speak in India in wherever Punjabi speaking immigrants have ended up, you know, the Philippines, Australia, the UK, US, the same language.

Lorna Dueck: How many people will that Bible be available to that Punjabi new, cleaned up professional translation?

Jeff Green: It's a huge number. I think there's at least half a million in Canada alone, and around the world, I mean, it's tens of millions, right? Like it's a one of the bigger languages.

Lorna Dueck: And Canada will be the birthplace of that fresh new translation.

Jeff Green: Well, our team involves Americans and it involves some people in India as well. So, it's not just us, but we're the ones who got asked to help the churches work on this and put the team together.

And so, we've had the privilege of being involved in it for the sake of the Punjabi people around the world.

Lorna Dueck: And what gets you excited about a Punjabi translation hitting the ground like that? What gets you excited?

Jeff Green: The time I've spent with the Punjabi churches in Alberta actually would blow your mind. That might make a good interview sometime to talk to some of them.

But visiting with them, it's like the Book of Acts, you know, just how alive and vibrant the church is. And people, you know, sharing the Gospel with their relatives and neighbours and coming to faith. The stories they tell of more than once I've heard

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from a Sikh background believer that when they got serious about their Sikh faith and started taking their Scriptures seriously and searching to know God, it led them to Jesus.

Like so the way God is at work in the Punjabi church is just incredible and Punjabi, you know, speaking community.

Lorna Dueck: Okay, so that's clearly a highlight for you. What's going on there? What challenges would you want Canadian audiences to know about the work for the translation team here in Canada that we're facing?

Jeff Green: One of the challenges we face in our work with Indigenous communities is just, well, it's the challenges they face because of the situations they're in, which, you know, generations of Canadian governments and institutions and the church have contributed to making, you know, not good.

So, like the languages, right, are not as healthy because people were punished for speaking their languages. That doesn't happen anymore, so, I really hope and understand, but it did.

And in memory, like in the recent enough past that there are people who remember those punishments. And so, you can't blame them for maybe not teaching their children their language and raising their children English so their children wouldn't have that trouble. And then those children grow up not being able to connect with the parents in the same mother tongue, and so on the same deep level and all the ramifications that has for succeeding generations and for the society, you know, as a whole and for the individuals, and their lack of that deep root back into their own culture and sense of belonging in the world. Like just all the ways that affects the people involved in these translations.

So, the churches there and the Christians involved in these translations all have a hope that the Bible in their language can contribute to the well-being of their

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communities, to people finding hope, you know, in Jesus and the message of the Bible.

Lorna Dueck: And so, the very real need to put it into their heritage language, which they are reviving.

Jeff Green: Exactly.

Lorna Dueck: You have nations within Canada, our First Nations, many nations, they are reviving their own languages. So, Christianity's book is going to be relevant. It needs to be in the heritage language of their people.

Jeff Green: Yeah. And if the Bible in their language can play a role in making things better for their community, then we're on board. We hope that with them.

And we're privileged to be invited in by them under their leadership because it's their project, it's their language. We come alongside and equip them and help them do this good work for the sake of their communities.

Lorna Dueck: So, Canada's Aboriginal church in those particular tribal collections takes the lead, approaches you.

Jeff Green: Of course.

Lorna Dueck: And then you as the translation head at the Bible Society says, here's what we will need from your community because it's their people that are painstakingly going over this, right?

Jeff Green: That's right. We work alongside them.

I spent, you know, five hours yesterday with our team in Southern Alberta on a Zoom call, just helping them go through, you know, with a fine-tooth comb through parts of their translation in Luke 8. So, we work with them, but it's their work, it's their language. They're the ones who speak it and they're the ones who want it. And so, we come alongside and help how we can.

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Lorna Dueck: And do you, tell me about the feedback you get then, the feedback you get both in the process and after a completed project? What's happening?

Jeff Green: You know, it's sort of a cliché for people to say God speaks my language, but you still hear it. It's still people's aha moment. You know, when I remember that at the launch of the Mohawk Bible a couple of years ago, when the whole Bible was completed, making it only one of four Indigenous languages in Canada to have the whole Bible.

So, Mohawk Bible was completed. We did some celebrations in communities where Mohawk is spoken. And after those, just standing in line, you know, for the meal afterwards, I heard someone walking by talking about how God speaks their language.

So that's a very powerful statement for them. Its God isn't, you know, He's not just the God of the English and French who came here and did all this stuff to their community. He's also the Creator that they may have been talking about for generations and in relationship with.

And now they have the Creator's book and revelation, and they can get to know the Creator because He speaks their language.

Lorna Dueck: Wow. Well, as we conclude, it's a very unique role you have for Canada.

And I don't want to overspeak the importance of how Bible translation can bring healing to the historic wounds that have been, in part, done by the Canadian church history and the Canadian government. But is there anything else you want to conclude with as we wrap things up, Jeff?

Jeff Green: No, I maybe just come back to how inspired I am when I'm at gatherings of, say, Indigenous Christians, where I'm thinking of an event in Ottawa that was a national Indigenous prayer event. First Nations leadership, Indigenous leadership,

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and they put together the program, and we were invited to participate and support the event.

But just seeing their leadership, their hope for the future, their sense that, you know, there are good things ahead, better days ahead, and the Indigenous church, now is the time to rise up and be that positive voice and force for positive change in their communities. And passing on that vision from the mature leaders to the next generations. Yeah, it's inspiring to work alongside people like that.

Lorna Dueck: Well, thank you very much for your work in leading Bible translation here in Canada for the unique needs of Canada's population base and our language bases here. Thank you, Jeff Green.

Jeff Green: Thank you.