

words = the abc of missionaries

Not knowing the local language can get a missionary into all sorts of strife. Wendy Reed writes about learning language.

Our Bishop and others now refer to us as “wapelekwa”, the “sent ones”, rather than “missionaries”. There are two possible words in Swahili that could be used: “kutuma” from which we get the Swahili word for apostle and “kupeleka”, from which we get “wapelekwa”.

I decided to consult Nicholas, the coordinator of the language school in Iringa to which many of our CMS missionaries go. He is a language scholar, has a solid Christian background and a desire to do all he can to help further the work of Christian missionaries. When I asked him to define for me the difference between the two Swahili words he said that the second had strong connotations of being sent but being accompanied by the one who sent. Isn't that just what missionaries are? Sent but not alone? Sent but with the Lord's Spirit accompanying them, and also, God willing, with the support and prayers of Christians at home?

I am so thankful that CMS places great stress on acquiring language. Language is tied up with understanding culture and with 'belonging'. To what extent can you belong without language? A recent article in *The Guardian Weekly* about survival in another culture starts with, “There are lots of reasons why you should learn the local language. It will open doors, help you understand the culture and make friends, and will help you in your job”.

How much more is this true of those who are sent with the good news of Jesus? Charlemagne is purported to have said, “To possess another language is to possess another soul”. Certainly it is very difficult to share the gospel without language, and a good knowledge of the language at that.

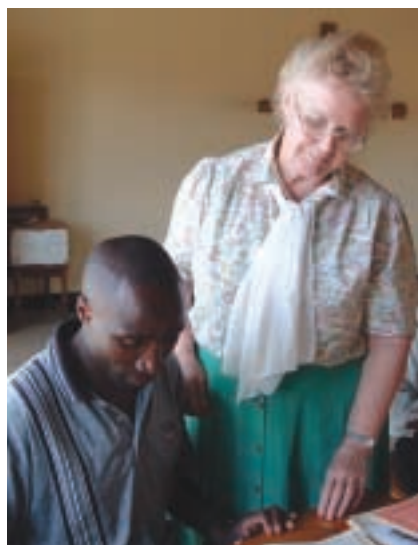


Nicholas coordinates the language school in Iringa and spends one afternoon a week with Wendy Reed, working on how to help missionaries learn language they will need specifically for use in a Christian context.

Francis of Assisi is supposed to have said, “Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words”. It is certainly true that one can witness to the Lord by one's behaviour and character, but without words this is limited, and one cannot point to the source of one's hope in Christ.

Words change meaning

Learning another language is a lifelong task. Words change meaning; new words are invented. When Sir Christopher Wren built St Paul's Cathedral in London he presented it for inspection to Queen Anne. She pronounced it “artificial”, “amusing” and “awful”. He was delighted! Why? Because in 1710 “artificial” meant “artful”, “amusing” meant “amazing” and “awful” meant “awe-inspiring”! So pray for missionaries as they struggle with language learning. They will make many mistakes. They need to be able to laugh at themselves.



Nicholas tells stories of humorous mistakes made in learning Kiswahili. There is the Bishop who visited a community of sisters, expecting a cup of tea. When none appeared he asked, in an aggrieved tone, “Hakuna bikira hapa?” instead of “Hakuna birika hapa?” Bikira means virgin and birika means teapot!

The other is of an eccentric expatriate who went to live on his own in the bush. When visitors called unexpectedly he rushed out to greet them, carrying his hunting gun. Instead of calling out “Karibuni!” (Welcome) he called “Kaburini!”, which is Kiswahili for “in the graves”. His visitors turned and ran!

We have all made mistakes as we grapple with learning language. Sometimes they can be disastrous, but they are mostly just amusing. And Tanzanians are so gracious and accepting of our stupidity. Occasionally our students have said, “Excuse me teacher, but I don't think you meant that”. The only way to learn a language is to use it, make mistakes, pick ourselves up and start all over again! Join hands with us in prayer as we do this.

I come now full circle. Missionaries are sent, but accompanied on their journey by the one who sent them. But you have an enormous role to play as you support and encourage them. In a sense you too are ‘accompanying them’.

Wendy Reed with a student at Amani Training Centre.