

Translation Feasibility Committee

Floor Committee #22

Our calling

The Translation Feasibility Committee was appointed by the synod's praesidium following the 2011 synod convention. The committee was asked to "study the feasibility of producing a confessional Lutheran Bible translation and/or study Bible with notes to accompany whatever Bible translation is chosen" by the synod. We understand "feasible" to mean "capable of being done or carried out" (merriam-webster.com).

Creating a confessional Lutheran Bible translation

As our committee noted in the preliminary report to last year's district conventions, the production of a confessional Lutheran translation of the Bible is not a short-term solution to the need to choose a Bible translation for use in our synod's publications. A Bible translation is a ten- to fifteen-year project. Though some believe that revising an existing Bible translation could shorten the process, others are convinced that a revision would require nearly as much time as starting from scratch.

In our preliminary report, we stated that we intended to examine the Bible translation project in terms of legal, technical, and economic feasibility. Legally and ethically we could not do a slight revision of an existing translation without the publisher's permission. It's highly unlikely that the publisher of a major translation would give us that permission. It may be possible to gain permission to revise a lesser known Bible translation, but it would be necessary to determine how much revising would need to be done to make it a translation that could gain broad acceptance in WELS churches. There is a Web-based translation of the Bible, the World English Bible (WEB), which is not copyrighted and could be used as a base translation, as long as the name of the translation is changed if any revisions are made to it.

Our committee experimented with working from a base translation to produce a new translation of various chapters of the Bible. This small-scale experiment showed us that a translation of the selected chapters could be produced but that it would be necessary to come together on translation philosophy and principles, as well as on translation rubrics, if the work of various teams of translators were to result in a translation of the entire Bible that's philosophically and stylistically consistent. We also recognize that translating a few chapters of the Bible is nothing like the enormous task of translating the entire Bible.

A subcommittee of our group worked to develop translation process models. As they imagined what the producing of a new Bible translation might look like, different members of the group came up with different process models. While much within these different models is similar, it also fair to say that the different models represent a spectrum of possibilities.

Toward one side of the spectrum is a model that involves as few as 20-22 translators and editors. We might call this the lower manpower model. Toward the other side of the spectrum is a model that involves as many as 40-45 translators and editors. We might call this the higher manpower model.

The lower manpower model includes a plan for translators also serving as editors, while the higher manpower model calls for men to serve as one or the other but not both.

The lower manpower model suggests that a larger group of pastors, teachers, and laypeople serve as reading consultants, while the higher manpower model does not.

The lower manpower model does not necessarily call for salaried commissions, while the higher manpower model does. For this reason, the higher manpower model is estimated to cost \$1.3 million over 15 years.

We do not see these two different models as extremes on the translation process spectrum. Reasonable people could come up with translation processes that stand outside these models on the spectrum. In other words, "lower than lower manpower models" and "higher than higher manpower models" may be suggested, but we would see them as less desirable. Reasonable people could also come up with translation processes that stand between these models on the spectrum, representing a blending of the lower and higher manpower models.

In the two models there are differences in qualifications seen as necessary for translators and editors. The lower manpower model calls for worker training professors to be involved in various editorial levels, but the translators would not necessarily be professors who teach the biblical languages and could include pastors.

The higher manpower model requires translators to have taught their section of Scripture on the college or seminary level. It requires the same qualification for editors. Thus, in this model, all translators and editors would have to be current or former worker training professors.

We did not develop a list of qualifications for pastors who would be asked to serve as translators or editors in the lower manpower model. Obviously, these men would have to have excellent gifts in the biblical languages. It has not been determined whether having participated in translation projects in the past is necessary for consideration. Nor has it been determined how exactly we would identify these pastors. Those who lean more toward the lower manpower model are confident an adequate number of pastors and/or retired pastors could be found to do the translating and editing work.

While both of the models described above would have an impact on those who serve as teachers of Hebrew and Greek in our ministerial education schools, the impact would be greater if the higher manpower model were chosen. This would require careful evaluation, lest the work of educating future pastors suffer because their professors are overloaded with work or taken away from the classroom entirely. Our committee received several letters from current and former language professors, as well as from the chairman of the seminary's governing board, expressing precisely this concern. A major challenge in deciding to go forward with a confessional Lutheran translation of the Bible is that many of the men we'd depend on to lead the way in this effort, professors of biblical languages at our ministerial education schools, don't think it's wise—for a variety of reasons—for us to produce our own Bible translation. They could be put into the position of being asked to work for years on a project they do not support.

The resolution approved at the 2011 synod convention calls for investigating the feasibility of producing "a confessional Lutheran" translation of the Bible. Our committee understood that to mean that we should not limit our investigation to determining whether the resources for producing a new translation exist only in WELS, but among other confessional Lutherans. Our committee did some very preliminary checking on the possibility of enlisting Bible scholars from the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) and from the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. The president of the ELS seminary indicated a willingness to assist in a Bible translation project. No Missouri Synod Bible scholars were asked in so many words whether they would be willing to assist in such a project. However, the Missouri Synod has moved strongly in the direction of using the English Standard Version and is in the midst of working on the Concordia Commentary Series. If we were lacking significant contributions to the translation work by scholars from outside our synod, the translation would likely be seen as the WELS Bible.

In regard to economic feasibility, we pointed out in our preliminary report that the Holman Christian Standard Bible took 15 years to produce at a cost of \$10 million. The English Standard Version, which is a revision of an existing translation, took 10 years to produce and cost \$2.5 million. The higher manpower model described above was estimated to cost \$1.3 million. (This is a conservative estimate only of the cost paying commissions to translators and editors, without any other production costs.) This money would be needed over a period of years before a single copy of the new translation could be sold to recover the costs. It's possible that if the New Testament were completed first, profits from selling it could be used to finance the translation of the Old Testament. If the lower manpower model were chosen, the cost could go down, but there would still be the need for money for travel, meetings, and, at the very least, a project director. It also seems reasonable to expect that the time necessary to complete the translation would increase if those working on it were volunteering their efforts in their free time. If we were not able to identify a non-budgetary source of funding for the translation project, it would also be necessary to evaluate the need for the translation project over against other synodical priorities, such as mission work and ministerial education.

A concern that was addressed to our committee several times is that even if we are capable of producing a new Bible translation, it may not be wise to do so because it could be perceived as a sectarian Bible, akin to the New World Translation of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The Roman Catholic Church has its approved Bible translations and the Holman Christian Standard Bible is closely associated with the Southern Baptist Convention, but it's difficult to think of another Christian denomination that has its own translation of the Bible. This raises the possibility that having our own translation of the Bible would cause people to wonder whether we're not capable of teaching our doctrine from any other translation. If we were to produce a good, accurate, non-idiosyncratic translation, we would have a ready answer to accusations that the translation is sectarian. The perception that the translation is sectarian, however, may linger, if all of the translators are Lutherans.

It's necessary to acknowledge, too, that a confessional Lutheran translation of the Bible may not be widely accepted by WELS congregations. The assumption that there would be near universal acceptance of a WELS or confessional Lutheran translation may be a hazardous one, given the limited use of Lutheran translations of the Bible (William Beck's An American Translation and Julian Anderson's translation, for example) in WELS congregations. The reasons for the limited use of these translations may include not only a general satisfaction with the NIV84, but also a concern about the translation philosophy employed by these Bibles, as well as the reluctance to use a "Lutheran" Bible.

Creating a study Bible

The suggestion that WELS produce a study Bible was originally offered as a way by which some of the perceived weaknesses in the NIV2011 could be addressed and corrected. While it may seem that producing a study Bible might be more feasible than producing a new translation of the Bible, we found that there would be some significant obstacles here as well.

Our committee asked Northwestern Publishing House (NPH) to provide estimates of the time and the cost of producing such a study Bible. NPH estimated that it would take 15 years to complete a study Bible. NPH also calculated that it would need a subsidy of \$1.5 million to fund the development of a study Bible and could not expect to recover these costs later through sales of the book. (The \$1.5 million includes all costs for developing the study Bible, but does not include the cost of printing and royalties.) Therefore, it would be necessary to identify a source for this \$1.5 million so that the development of the study Bible could go forward. NPH does not have that amount of seed money available.

There would be an additional challenge in using the text of the NIV2011 in a study Bible. The royalties charged by Zondervan, the publisher of the NIV2011, would be significantly higher than those charged either by Crossway (publisher of the English Standard Version) or Holman (publisher of the Holman Christian Standard Bible). Zondervan's royalty would be 10 percent of full retail price, compared to 2 percent of wholesale discount price for Crossway and 3 to 5 percent of wholesale discount price for Holman. In addition, Zondervan would charge an even higher royalty (25 percent of full retail price) on sales of a digital version of such a study Bible. At a time when sales of e-books are growing rapidly, the high royalties charged by Zondervan would make it very difficult for NPH to publish an economically viable digital version of the study Bible.

If our synod were to choose the English Standard Version for use in our publications, it would not seem to be wise or necessary to produce a study Bible, since the Lutheran Study Bible (published by Concordia on the basis of the ESV text) already exists.

If our synod were to opt for the Holman Christian Standard Bible, a study Bible project may be more economically feasible, though there would still be the need to find funds for the \$1.5 million of production costs.

If we choose to produce a confessional Lutheran translation of the Bible, work on a study Bible based on that translation might be able to begin while the translating work is being done, but the study Bible could probably not be published until after the new translation has been completed, 10 to 15 years after the project begins.

It may be possible to produce a translation-neutral study Bible, that is, a study Bible that's not tied to one particular translation, though this would not address the original concern, which is to have a study Bible that provides notes on some of the passages in the NIV2011 that are perceived to be poorly translated.

In conclusion

In the end, there is disagreement on whether it is feasible to produce a confessional Lutheran translation of the Bible. Many believe that we simply do not have the resources to carry it out on our own. That was the initial conclusion of the Translation Evaluation Committee: "We came to the firm consensus that producing a WELS translation would not be feasible" (Translation Evaluation Committee, Supplemental Report for the 2011 WELS Convention, p. 2).

It's undeniable that producing a confessional Lutheran translation of the Bible would take an enormous amount of time. It would require a large amount of money at a time when funds for mission work and ministerial education are in short supply. Some of the men we'd rely upon most heavily to produce this translation have expressed their doubts about the wisdom of the project. At this point, we aren't even able to imagine all of the ramifications that undertaking a project of this size might have.

In light of all this, perhaps the question should not be, "Can we do it?" but, "Must we do it?" If the people of our synod believe that there is no existing translation of the Bible that can serve our preaching, teaching, and publishing needs,

then we'd trust that the Lord would help us find the resources and overcome the obstacles to carry out what is sure to be a very challenging project. But if an existing translation or translations can serve our needs, it would save the time and expense, not to mention the potential disruption to our ministerial education system, to use an existing translation.

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