

Wycliffe Bible Translators of Canada • Summer 2008



WORD *Alive*



DAWN IN THE RAINFOREST

In Brazil's Amazon jungle, the light of God's Word shines on tribal peoples who were once nearly extinct.



Summer 2008 • Volume 26, Number 2

WORD *Alive*

Connecting you to Bible translation



Alan Hood

A weathered sign warns travellers they are trespassing in a protected area. Brazil's government is especially protective of its Amazon tribal peoples, who are highly susceptible to diseases borne by outsiders.

Bible translators serving with ALEM, Wycliffe's partner organization in Brazil, have helped groups return from the brink of extinction. (See stories, pgs. 4 and 22.)

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Quoteworthy

"The book to read is not the one which thinks for you, but the one which makes you think. No book in the world equals the Bible for that."

—James McCosh (1811-1894),
Princeton University's 11th president



Partners in Bible Translation

Word Alive, which takes its name from Hebrews 4:12a, is the official publication of Wycliffe Bible Translators of Canada. Its mission is to inform, inspire and involve the Christian public as partners in the worldwide Bible translation movement.

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COVER
An Indian boy, sporting a Spiderman shirt, represents the wide gap between his world and the one his elders knew growing up in Brazil's Amazon region.

Photograph by Alan Hood

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Articles by Doug Lockhart • Photographs by Alan Hood

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Interview By Dwayne Janke

Correction: *Word Alive* (Spring 2008) failed to attribute the idea of the Vernacular Initiative for Translation and Literacy (VITAL) program to the right person. It was Martin Knauber of Wycliffe Germany who developed, planned and began implementing the strategy in partnership with local churches in Papua New Guinea.

BY
DWAYNE
JANKE



Loving People From the Brink of Extinction

Vanishing Peoples of the Earth, published by the National Geographic Society in 1968, had some dire news for its readers about the fate of Brazil's small indigenous people groups.

"Historians have recorded the disappearance of about a hundred tribes; no one knows how many more have vanished since the 1500s," the book reported.

"Today so few members exist in some tribes that they too face extinction and it may be only a matter of time before contact with outsiders destroys the structure of their society."

A good number of those threatened tribes were located in Brazil's Amazon region. This past December, the *Word Alive* writer/photographer team of Doug Lockhart and Alan Hood visited two such tribes (the Arusana and the Karaum*). Both were on the brink of extinction when *Vanishing Peoples of the Earth* was written.

What Doug and Alan saw and photographed in these two jungle communities proved National Geographic's predictions wrong on two counts: 1) these tribes did not die out, and 2) it was actually outsiders who were largely responsible for their improved condition.

Bible translators serving with ALEM, Wycliffe's partner organization in Brazil, began living among the tribes in the late '80s and early '90s. Besides doing linguistic and translation work, these ALEM staff also provided medical aid, education, etc.

Thanks in large part to their service, motivated and marked by Christian love, the population of both tribal groups has not declined to oblivion, but has steadily increased. The quality of their material lives has also improved: they now benefit from modern tools, outboard engines, fishing tackle and other improvements that make their lives easier.

As for their spiritual lives, portions of Scripture are now available in both tribes' languages. Jesus promised His followers that they would have life and have it to the full. His good news is coming to these tribes through His Word, in a form they can truly understand. And it promises not extinction, but eternal life to those who accept it.

Some researchers estimate that Brazil has 240 indigenous groups with a population of 375,000. They speak 188 languages and dialects, and many do not have God's Word.

With a growing "pool" of potential missionaries to draw from in Brazil, ALEM leaders hope that many more will respond to the needs of Brazil's indigenous peoples for the Scriptures in their heart languages.

Let's pray that they do. ✨

* pseudonyms

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Note to readers: References to "SIL" are occasionally made in *Word Alive*. SIL is Wycliffe's key partner organization, dedicated to training, language research, translation and literacy.

Wycliffe Canada Vision Statement:

A world where translated Scriptures lead to transformed lives among people of all languages.

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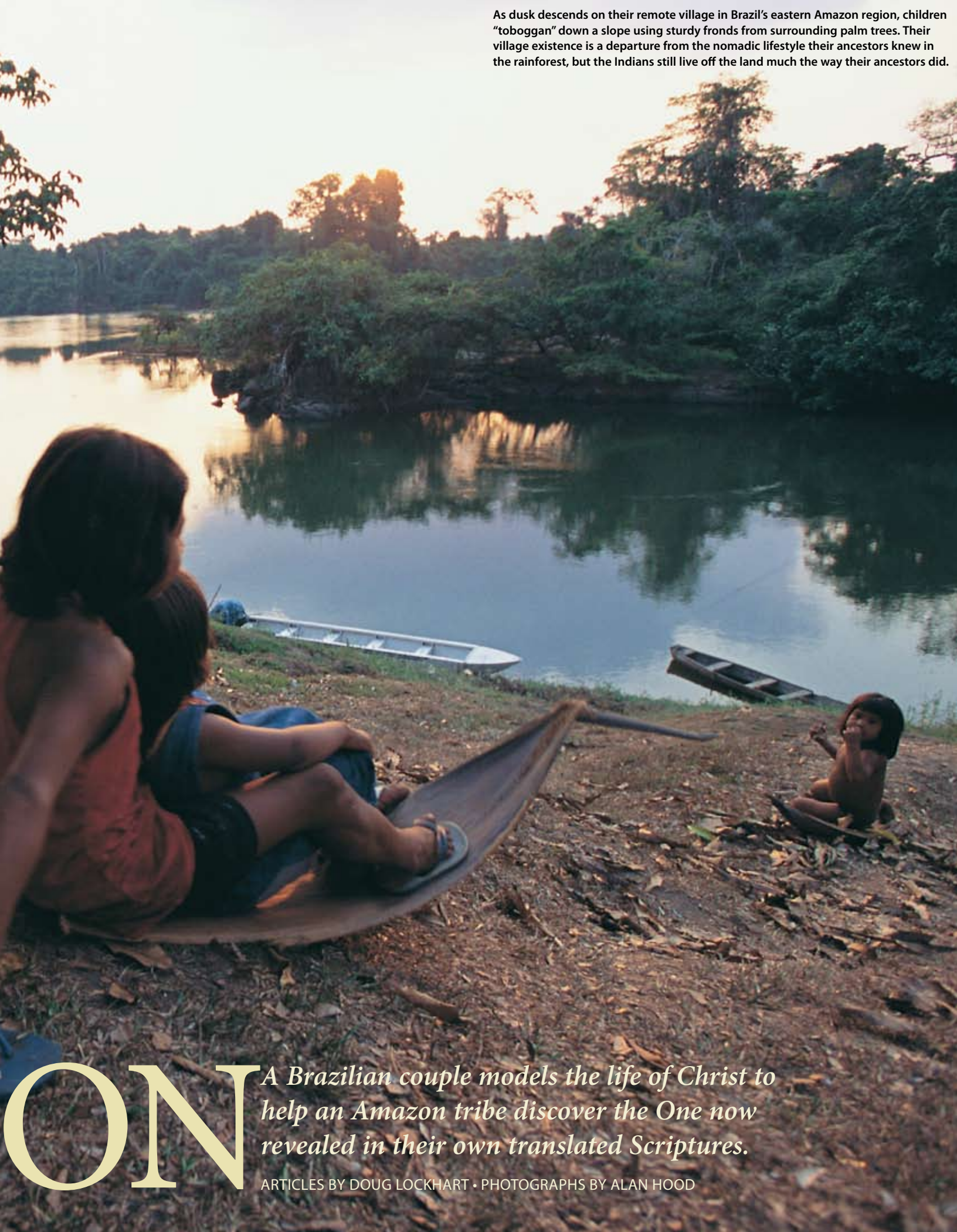
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As dusk descends on their remote village in Brazil's eastern Amazon region, children "toboggan" down a slope using sturdy fronds from surrounding palm trees. Their village existence is a departure from the nomadic lifestyle their ancestors knew in the rainforest, but the Indians still live off the land much the way their ancestors did.



ON

A Brazilian couple models the life of Christ to help an Amazon tribe discover the One now revealed in their own translated Scriptures.

ARTICLES BY DOUG LOCKHART • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALAN HOOD

To reach the isolated Arusana* village in Brazil's eastern Amazon rainforest, you leave the nearest town by boat and travel upriver for six grueling hours. That's six hours under a scorching sun, if you're not travelling in rainy season, through treacherous rapids and whirlpools that set your heart racing and leave you white-knuckled and wondering why anyone—let alone a family of four—would repeatedly make such a dangerous trip. Oseas (o-ZAY-us) and Heliana (el-ee-AN-ah) Silva and their children, Deborah and Lukas, have taken this thrill ride countless times over the past 19 years. They've done it so a dying people could find reasons to keep on living. The Brazilian couple works with ALEM, Wycliffe's partner agency for Bible translation in South America's largest country (see "A Made-in-Brazil Mission," page 14.)

Earning Trust

When Oseas and Heliana first came to work in Brazil's Pará state in 1989, nine tribes had only just begun to emerge from centuries of isolation. The Arusana had responded to the government's efforts to attract them in the early '70s, thereby receiving medical aid, education, modern tools and other benefits of the larger civilization beyond their traditional borders.

But that contact came with a price. Government employees also exposed the estimated 100 tribal members to measles, tuberculosis and other diseases. By the time Oseas and Heliana arrived, the tribe had dwindled to about 60—including just four children.

The Silvas wanted to translate Scripture, but initially, Brazilian authorities would only allow them to do medical work. Oseas had already earned his nursing credentials.

"I had some talent and a desire to minister in this way—and I could read instructions," he says with a grin.

The Portuguese-speaking couple began by learning the Indians' language. Over time, they analyzed the language, developed an alphabet and produced primers so they could eventually teach them to read in their mother tongue.

For the first seven years, the Silvas lived in the village about nine months annually. As the village midwife, Oseas was called upon to deliver babies, tend to the odd machete wound and dole out medicine. But in the beginning, he and Heliana encountered an unforeseen challenge.

"Every house had somebody that had been diagnosed with

* pseudonym





During a walkabout in the village, ALEM's Oseas (o-ZAY-us) Silva and his 18-year-old daughter Deborah joke with some of her childhood friends. While attending Bible school in Florida, Deborah struggled to understand passages in her English Bible—but the experience has helped shape her future plans. "I want to do what my parents are doing," she says, "to translate the Scriptures for some other indigenous group."

tuberculosis,” Oseas recalls. “And because of all this sickness, they lost any reason, any desire, to keep living on as a people. “They felt that even if babies were born, they had no future.”

Baby Desires

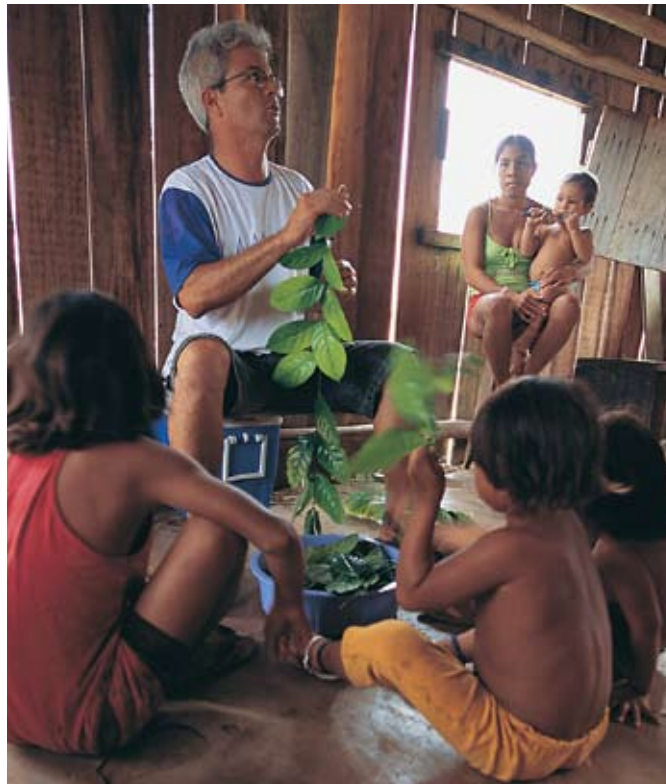
At the time, the Silvas were caring for their infant daughter Deborah, and a government employee in the village had three youngsters. Oseas says the children’s presence helped stimulate desire among the Indians to have babies again.

“Because Deborah was here, living in this situation, going everywhere with the Indians . . . they would say, ‘We want her to have other children to play with.’”

Today, the tribe’s population has more than doubled to roughly 130—about the size of a modest church congregation in Canada. Still, some observers may wonder if the Silvas’ talents might be put to better use, by translating the Bible for a larger group. After all, not a single tribe member has yet become a Christian. But Oseas and Heliana know God led them here to help attract these particular Indians to Christ.

Ironically, when the couple met in a Brazilian Bible college in the early ’80s, neither had any desire to be a Bible translator or to work among indigenous people. In fact, Oseas had set his heart on being a missionary in France, while Heliana was aiming to serve the Lord in India.

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Surrounded by ever-present visitors in his cabin, Oseas prepares to make an anti-inflammatory tea, from the leaves of a local plant called *unha de gato* (cat’s claw) that were brought to him by village friends. The herb eases his back pain, likely caused by frequent river travel.



Disaster on the River

ALEM's Heliana Silva (left) had often travelled by boat, ever since she and her husband Oseas began working among the Arusana people in 1989. But she still felt fear whenever the boat had to pass through turbulent water during journeys that could take up to three days.

That fear became reality one unforgettable afternoon in 1999.

Heliana was making her way back to the tribe with nine travelling companions from the village. She was carrying with her the only printed copy of a translation of Jonah she and Oseas had completed; the original data had been lost earlier when their computer crashed.

Sudden Sinking

As the boat approached a particularly rough passage of whitewater, Heliana felt her pulse quicken. The pilot managed to get through it, but then suddenly, the engine sputtered and died. The fast moving current pulled the boat back into the rapids, where it quickly filled with water and began sinking.

"When I realized what was happening, I grabbed an empty gas can to hang onto, and jumped in the water. I didn't know how to swim that well. I had to let go of the can and start swimming towards a nearby rock, and as I did, I saw the boat being swept downriver with other passengers: a man, his wife and their child."

After making it to the rock, Heliana took stock of her situation. The others had made it safely to shore, but she was in the middle of the river. One of the men swam to her and told her she'd have to swim to where the others were.

"That was almost too much for me," she says, "but I was finally able to do it."

Not All Rescued

She joined six other survivors on the shoreline, where they waited for help. About four hours later, as the sun was setting, two fishermen arrived in a small canoe. They announced that they had rescued an Arusana woman and child further downstream—but the child's father had drowned.

Eventually, the nine survivors were taken by boat to a populated island, where they were able to arrange their transportation back to the village.

The emotional toll of the accident really struck Heliana when she was finally reunited with her husband and children in the Arusana village.

"I was extremely grateful to God that I was alone when the accident happened," she says. "Oseas can swim well, but the children are another story . . ."

"I'm so grateful that I just had to take care of myself. I didn't have to worry about what was going to happen to them."

Tempted to Quit

Heliana says the harrowing experience, which swept away the Jonah translation, definitely tempted her to quit.

"On the river that day, I told the Lord, 'I never want to make this trip again.' But then I felt God was saying, 'If you don't come, who will?'"

"So I told the Lord, 'Okay, if I have to, I'll return.'"

"But to this day, whenever we pass that section of water . . . it's very difficult for me."



The Silvas' favourite boat pilot, Pedro (in boat), probably doesn't realize he's part of the global Bible translation movement. He's just doing his job, but he's a local legend because of his amazing ability to navigate these treacherous waterways, even by moonlight. Heliana (above, left) nearly drowned in these waters in 1999.



A young mother prepares a drink made from manioc, a starchy, poisonous root that must be processed carefully for human consumption. Their diet is augmented by a variety of fishes, fowl and wild game like boar and monkey.

But God had other plans.

Oseas nearly missed them; during his first semester in Bible college, he grew restless. He felt there were too many rules and restrictions in place and he even hated the food. He decided he'd rather go back to his job as manager of a car rental agency.

One day, as he made his way to the college's chapel service, he confided in a classmate, telling her he was planning to leave and citing a long list of complaints about life at the Bible school.

The service began routinely, but later a professor stood up to speak—and Oseas' life would never be the same.

"He started talking," Oseas recalls, eyes brimming with tears, "and he said, 'You decided to leave today,' and he listed all the reasons I had told my friend.

"He didn't know this, I hadn't shared it with anyone else. He was speaking in general, to all the students, but he was speaking as if he was speaking to a certain person. And he said, 'You're not going to leave; you're going to be a pastor in the middle of the Amazon jungle.'"

Beside him, Oseas' friend had tears in her eyes. She asked him if he was really going to leave.

"I told her, 'No, I guess I'm not going anymore.'"



Towards the Mark

Oseas and Heliana married in 1986, shortly after graduating from Bible school. Thinking God might lead them to Europe or Asia, they immediately enrolled in a linguistics training course offered by ALEM, with the idea that it would help them to learn another language.

But God began to change their hearts, giving them a desire to serve one of Brazil's 240 indigenous groups. Their participation in ALEM's jungle survival course confirmed their calling to indigenous work.

Over the past two decades of ministry to the Arusana, the Silvas' progress in Bible translation has been slowed by the daily demands of life in a remote village and by other responsibilities with ALEM. For example, Heliana has travelled to Guinea-Bissau, Africa, to serve as an education and Scripture-use consultant (see "The Portuguese Connection," page 20).

But the couple remains committed to translating the Scriptures, even though many of the Indians are somewhat fluent in Portuguese.

"They can converse adequately in Portuguese," says Oseas, "but they would have difficulty understanding the deeper truths of God's Word in that language."

The Silvas now do much of their linguistic work in the nearest town—if a six-hour boat trip is considered "near." But back in the '90s, when they lived in the village more frequently, their linguistic work met with constant interruption because their door was always open. The practice is culturally appropriate—but it meant they were often playing host to gawking children, curious teens or adult Indians looking for conversation.

Crashed and Swallowed

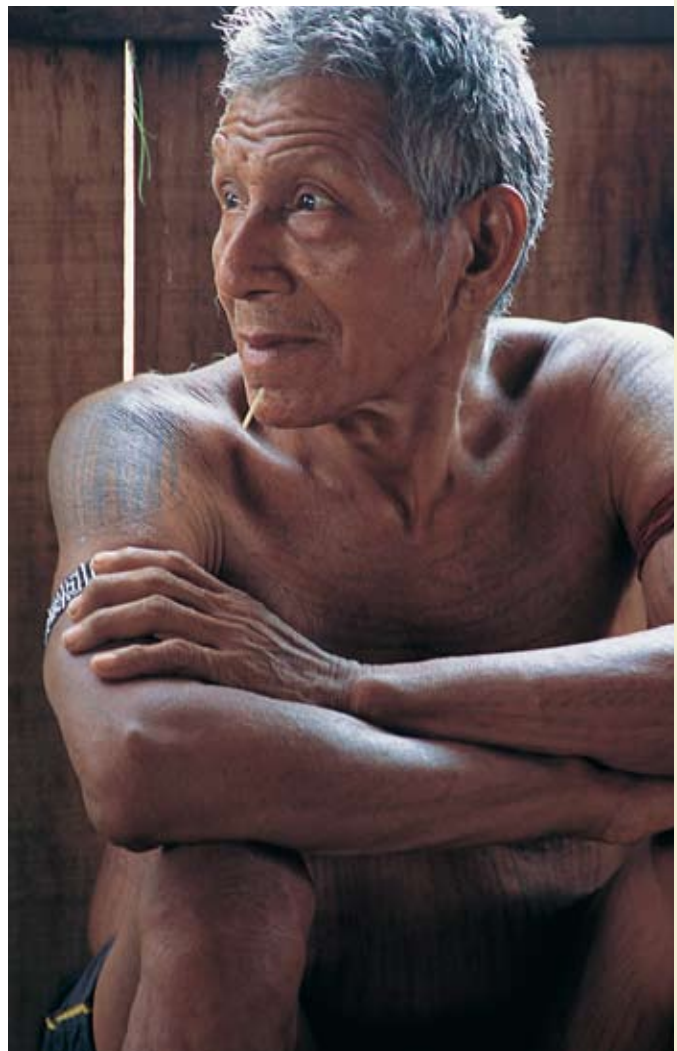
When the Silvas first considered which Bible book to translate, they sensed the Lord prompting them to start with Jonah—an unusual choice for a first translation.

"In the village . . . there was constant conflict," recalls Oseas, "fighting and bickering and rumours . . ."

The Silvas felt Jonah had a simple message, one that might help the Arusana understand that God was watching their actions and that He judges sin.



There are plenty of youngsters in the village now, but when the Silvas first arrived in 1989, only four small children lived here. Oseas brought many young adults now in the village into the world when he served as midwife. Members of one family group that had no children, including this man (right), "adopted" the Silvas—a gesture that proved crucial to their acceptance in the village.



“It’s all because you came here to live with us and care for us, that we have been able to continue as a people.”

—*Arusana Indian*

“Our language helpers . . . enjoyed the story,” says Oseas, “and it really surprised them that God would actually bring fire down on the heads of the Ninevites, because of the way they were acting.

“It left a real impression on them.”

But before the translation could be shared with the entire tribe, the Silvas’ computer crashed, losing all their data.

Only a printed draft remained, but it was “swallowed” like its biblical namesake a short time later—not by a big fish, but by the roiling water that nearly claimed Heliana’s life in a boat accident (see “Disaster on the River,” page 9).

Instead of re-translating Jonah, the couple chose to work on Luke’s Gospel, writing it out by hand.

“It wasn’t until about . . . 2004 that we really felt we had something worthwhile,” says Oseas, “as far as the translation work was concerned.”

The couple has paid a price for their perseverance; enduring illness, frequent separations, financial struggles and exhausting travel. Oseas also suffers from chronic back pain that will likely require surgery.

But the ALEM missionary says it’s a relationship with Christ that keeps them going.

“I’ve learned that it’s not just the love for the people, or the needs of the people . . . but it’s the love for Jesus that makes you stay.”

Love Returned

For their part, many of the Indians have grown to love Heliana, Deborah, Lukas and the man who delivered many of them into the world. One tribal elder recently told Oseas, “It’s all because you came to live with us and care for us, that we have been able to continue as a people.”

The tribe would likely be extinct now, had the Brazilian government not succeeded in “attracting” them to interact with the outside world. That outside world has included the Silva family, sent by God as part of His plan to help the Indians discover the Main Attraction—the One now revealed in their own translated Scriptures. ✦





Outside their home church, Oseas, clutching a second-draft translation of Luke's Gospel, says farewell to Pastor Daniel Vargas before leaving by boat for the Indian village. The congregation in this major town has supported the Silvas and another ALEM couple for nearly two decades.



Former president Gino da Silva and his wife Tate (TAH-tay) exemplify the vibrancy and enthusiasm that drives ALEM, Wycliffe's partner organization for Bible translation in Brazil. The organization marked its 25th anniversary in 2007.



Wycliffe's partner organization for Bible translation in Brazil is committed to taking God's Word "beyond the frontiers."



When SIL, Wycliffe's key partner organization dedicated to training, language research, translation and literacy, began its work in Brazil in 1956, the country was viewed by most North American and European churchgoers as a major mission field.

While it's still true that dozens of Brazil's language groups have yet to receive God's Word in their heart language, Brazil has since become a major missionary-*sending* nation.

"SIL had a strong desire to see Brazilians trained in Bible translation and sent out," says Steve Sheldon, who directed SIL's Brazil branch from 1977 to 1985. "But for various reasons, SIL wasn't able to continue its training programs.

"That's when a few Brazilian church leaders, with input and encouragement from SIL, began talking about forming a Brazilian mission focused on training, sending and supervising language programs in Brazil."

Those discussions eventually resulted in the formation of ALEM (the acronym, in Portuguese, means "beyond"). From its inception in 1982, this made-in-Brazil mission organization has dedicated itself to training Brazilians in linguistics, anthropology and Bible translation, with a focus on the country's indigenous peoples.

25 Years and Counting

ALEM, which celebrated its 25th anniversary last year, has 53 members working in 12 indigenous groups throughout Brazil. These groups' populations vary greatly, from just over 100 to tens of thousands.

While most projects involve Bible translation, some focus on providing medical aid, education or community development.

So far, members of ALEM have completed one New Testament translation for the Tucano people. In some language projects, progress has been slow and fraught with difficulties (see stories, pages 4 and 22).

In some areas where an indigenous group has already received the translated Scriptures, ALEM is working to stimulate interest

More on the Web ▶ For more about ALEM's work in promoting Scripture use, visit <www.wycliffe.ca/wordalive>.

in the Bible through vernacular media such as audio recordings, the *JESUS* Film and radio.

Key Partnerships

While ALEM is making an impact in both Bible translation and vernacular media, the organization also has a stellar record in training Brazilians for cross-cultural missions.

Gino da Silva, former president of ALEM, estimates the organization has trained more than 650 people over the years through its six-month training course in linguistics (CLM), jungle-survival training and other courses.

Of students who received ALEM training between 2000 and 2006, more than 70 per cent are involved in missions work related to translation, literacy, Scripture use or church planting in minority language groups.

ALEM works closely with a variety of mission partners. It also maintains close ties with SIL, which is still actively involved in training Brazilians for Bible translation.

SIL came to Brazil at the invitation of the Indian Protection Service and the National Museum of the University of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro. Today, SIL Brazil works in more than 30





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ALEM's training centre is located in Brasilia, a city of more than 2.45 million that became the country's capital in 1960. ALEM has trained more than 650 Brazilians in linguistics and cross-cultural ministry; many of those trained are now serving full time in Brazil and overseas, including Guinea-Bissau (see story, pg. 20).

"It's important for people to receive the Word of God in their own language, so they can really understand it...."

—Pastor Daniel Vargas

distinct languages, in collaboration with national institutions in language-related fields such as education, anthropology and community development. SIL members also serve as teachers and consultants in ALEM's training course and Bible translation projects.

Several Canadians played integral roles in encouraging ALEM's formation and ministry, including Jack Popjes. The former director of Wycliffe Canada, along with his wife Jo, helped translate much of the Bible for Brazil's Canela Indians.

Isabel Murphy, another Canadian Wycliffe member, has helped train most of ALEM's students over the past 25 years.

Many of ALEM's trainees have become missionaries outside of Brazil. Some are serving with AMIDE, a Brazilian mission active in Bible translation in Guinea-Bissau, Africa, which has the same official language as Brazil: Portuguese (see "The Portuguese Connection," page 20).

Challenging the Church

ALEM is also working to involve more of Brazil's churches in the work of Bible translation. The Church in Brazil has seen remarkable growth over the past few decades and as a result, many *Brasileiros* have answered God's call to serve overseas and among the country's indigenous peoples. But many more are still needed.

"There are 180,000 churches in Brazil," says ALEM board member and past president, Jose Carlos Alcantara. "But when you talk about the work of Bible translation . . . it means working at it over a long period of time.

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“And working with very small groups, this doesn’t challenge many believers . . . it doesn’t stir up interest. They think more in terms of immediate results.”

Like other young people worldwide, many Brazilian young people are opting to participate in short-term missions that literally offer a world of choices. Few seem willing to invest their lives in long-term, language-related ministries.

ALEM’s recruitment efforts are also hindered somewhat by negative attitudes towards indigenous cultures, says Alcantara.

“In cities that are quite close to indigenous areas, you sense a lot more opposition to the Indians, and bad feelings about the indigenous people . . . within the Church culture.”

More Churches Sharing the Vision

However, there are a growing number of churches that share ALEM’s vision of providing God’s Word for Brazil’s indigenous peoples.

Daniel Vargas, senior pastor of a Baptist church in Brazil’s Pará state, says his church identifies with ALEM’s vision and supports two couples that are working in the Amazon.

“We couldn’t go to the indigenous groups,” says Vargas of his church, “but here were two couples that were well-trained and able to do it.

“It’s important for people to receive the Word of God in their own language, so they can really understand it . . .”

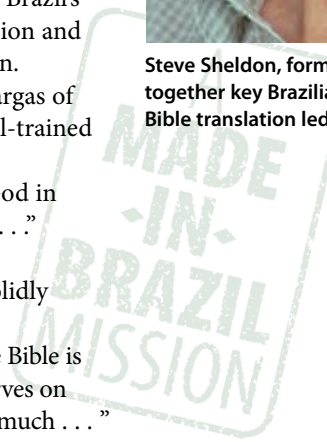
Another pastor, Obedes Ferreira of the National Presbyterian Church in Brasilia, says his church is solidly behind ALEM’s work.

“We understand that this ministry of translating the Bible is fundamental and essential,” says Ferreira, who also serves on ALEM’s board of directors. “That’s why we value it so much . . .”

Ferreira says he is impressed by both the character and the



Steve Sheldon, former director of SIL Brazil, helped bring together key Brazilian church leaders whose vision for Bible translation led them to found ALEM in 1982.



Brazil At a Glance

Official Name: Federated Republic of Brazil.

Location: Eastern South America, bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Shares common boundaries with every South American country except Chile & Ecuador. Capital: Brasilia – 2.45 million pop. (2007 estimate).

Geography: 8.51 million sq. km (the world’s fifth largest country; 85% the size of Canada). Mostly flat to rolling lowlands in north; some plains, hills, mountains, and narrow coastal belt; mostly tropical, but temperate in south.

Government: Federal republic with National Congress; democracy; has 26 states & 1 federal district.

Economy: Characterized by large and well-developed agricultural, mining, manufacturing and service sectors.

Population: 190 million (6 times that of Canada).

Peoples: A ‘melting pot’ of nations – 53% European; 34% mixed race; 11% African; 1% Asian; 14% Amerindian (in about 200 tribes).

Religion: Roman Catholic 73.6%; Protestant 15.4%; Spiritualist 1.3%; Bantu/voodoo 0.3%; other 1.8%; unspecified 0.2%, none 7.4% (2000 census).

Languages: 188 (official language: Portuguese).

Bible translation status: Bible/NT available – 32 languages • NT/OT translation in progress – 54
Approximate total remaining Bible translation need – 45.

Literacy Rate: 88% of adult population (15 years and older).



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ALEM receives strong support from the National Presbyterian Church in Brasilia. Senior pastor Obedes Ferreira (seen leading prayer, on stage, and pictured at right), says ALEM's work in Bible translation is "fundamental and essential" to the global mission task.



"If indigenous peoples can have access to the Bible, they'll be transformed."
—Pastor Obedes Ferreira

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qualifications of the ALEM members supported by his church, noting they are well trained and yet always working to improve their skills.

But it's clear that Ferreira also deeply cares personally for the ALEM workers who are part of his flock.

"We are always communicating, praying for them, so we have a very close relationship. This relationship is strong because we have the same things in common, in that we value the Bible.

"If indigenous peoples can have access to the Bible, they'll be transformed."

Beyond Today

Although ALEM has made good progress over 25 years, its staff has big dreams for the small organization.

Starting this year, ALEM will extend its CLM training course schedule to run from January through November, aligning it more closely with course models used around the world by SIL.

Another big event on the horizon is a pending partnership with Mackenzie Presbyterian University, a campus of 40,000 students located in São Paulo. The agreement could see Mackenzie offer introductory courses in linguistics, or give credits to students who have attended the CLM course.

Some things will remain the same—such as the close working relationship between SIL, Wycliffe and ALEM.

"It's not important," says da Silva, "to define who is doing the job, who's responsible, who's the boss, who will get the credit.

"The important thing is we're working together." 🍀

"It's not important . . . who is doing the job, who's responsible, who's the boss, who will get the credit. The important thing is we're working together."

—Gino da Silva, former president of ALEM



Staff and students attending ALEM's training course last December sport colourful shirts promoting various church and mission events held in Brazil. The growth of the country's evangelical churches in recent decades has fuelled a burgeoning missions movement—but as is the case in most mission organizations, young men are in short supply.