

Wycliffe Bible Translators of Canada • Fall 2008

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INVOLVE

# WORD *Alive*

## **Hutterisch** FOR **HUTTERITES**

Translated children's Bible stories and  
an audio New Testament speak the  
heart language of a communal people.



Fall 2008 • Volume 26, Number 3

# WORD *Alive*

Connecting you to Bible translation



Alan Hood

Viewed from high atop grain bins, Forest River Hutterite Colony, in northeastern North Dakota, is patterned after a layout common to the 475 colonies in western North America. Hutterites have lived in such communal, largely agriculture-based settlements on this continent for more than a century.

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### Quoteworthy

“The gospel is a joyful message from God and Christ . . . a word of liberty that sets people free and makes them devout and blessed.”

—Peter Riedemann, early Hutterite leader, in Hutterite Confession of Faith, 1565



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**  
Hutterite Tony Waldner strides home from teaching Sunday school at Forest River Colony, N.D. With help from Wycliffe Bible Translators, Tony is translating an audio New Testament in his Hutterisch mother tongue.

Photograph by Alan Hood

BY  
DWAYNE  
JANKE

## Down to the Shirt Collar



Before I interviewed Arnold Hofer for this issue of *Word Alive*, the Hutterite minister of Acadia Colony, west of Winnipeg, Man., showed us the colony's church.

Aside from padded oak pews, the sanctuary is

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... and German teacher, and gardener, and historian, and archivist.

unadorned—no cross, no fancy pulpit, no stained glass. Arnold took us to the long table at the front, where he later led the daily, pre-supper *Gebet* (worship or prayer) service. Showing us a Hutterite German songbook, Arnold focused in on one example of what Hutterites sing in colonies across the Canadian and U.S. prairies and plains. It is a song written in 1557 by Hans Kräl, a Hutterite elder, about being imprisoned for his Anabaptist faith.

Authorities caught Kräl, identified as a hated Anabaptist, while he travelled in Austria. They tied him behind a horse, dragged him to prison, interrogated him and put him in a dungeon for several years.

"His shirt rotted off," Arnold told me. "Only his collar was left."

"God helped him to testify and he was willing to give up his life,"

Arnold continued. While being escorted elsewhere, Kräl escaped from a drunken guard. He returned to his community, but was so skinny and ragged that his wife first mistook him for a vagabond.

"This is the kind of story we tell our children," concluded Arnold. "So, we sing this song once a year, or once every other year, to be reminded."

It quickly became obvious on our visit that Hutterites greatly value their faith, history and tradition. They know of their forefathers' religious steadfastness in the face of persecution and even death, which they met with a deep trust in God.

Part of the Hutterites' history and tradition is using German in church services, including Luther's Bible as the authority. But another important piece of Hutterite heritage has been the day-to-day use of Hutterisch, their mother tongue for more than four centuries.

With this in mind, Wycliffe has helped Hutterites translate children's Bible stories into Hutterisch—the first-ever Hutterisch printed material for wide distribution.

Wycliffe is also helping to translate an audio New Testament into Hutterisch. Some Hutterites, like Ruth Kleinsasser at Milltown Colony near Winnipeg, are eager to see the fruit of this labour. As we visited in her kitchen, Ruth told me she is aware of how a Bible translation for the Mennonites in their Plautdietsch mother tongue has been of spiritual help to them.

"I was *so* amazed," Ruth said. "How much could it do for *us*?"

That is one of those questions only God can answer—and I'm sure He will. As God promises in Isaiah 55:11 (NIV): "My word . . . will achieve the purpose for which I sent it." ❁

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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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# Finding AN Open Door

Wycliffe  
discovers  
interest for  
translation  
among  
Hutterites.

For years, Dick Mueller and others in Wycliffe wondered if they would ever find Hutterites supportive of translating Bible materials or the Scriptures into Hutterisch.

“There was just no open door,” says Mueller.

Over several decades, various Wycliffe personnel did language research among the group. Surveys showed that, between themselves, all age groups of Hutterites speak their Hutterisch mother tongue.

However, Hutterites conduct their daily church services in what some describe as an archaic form of High German, including several hundred sermons used regularly each year. Luther’s German Bible is considered the standard Scripture. In school, children are taught in English, while High German language instruction is generally limited to two hours or so a day, and it also usually includes religious teaching.

“The leadership we talked to said, ‘Everybody understands High German. We’re not interested. We don’t have any need for it [translation in Hutterisch],’” Mueller says, recalling the findings of Wycliffe’s Hutterite surveys.

“But many of the lay people in the same surveys said, ‘We don’t really understand German that well, and if the Scriptures were in our language, we’d listen more in church.’ They weren’t understanding.”

## Never Gave Up

Mueller and his wife Susan worked for three decades in a Bible translation project among the Gwich’in people in northeast Alaska, starting in 1959. He later joined Wycliffe’s efforts for Hutterisch translation while serving as associate director for language work in North America.

Several years ago, says Mueller, some Hutterite women in South Dakota were willing to help translate the children’s Bible storybooks. However, a Hutterite leader quashed the printing of the stories, saying the text had errors.

Mueller never gave up. In late 2006, he and Wycliffe Germany’s Martin Knauber (who was hoping to help translate the New Testament into Hutterisch—see “The e-Book is Coming,” pg. 18) approached a Hutterite Education Committee at a meeting near Winnipeg. This group gives oversight to education policies and standards for a more progressive segment of Schmiedleut Hutterite colonies in the region.

Mueller and Knauber asked the committee to approve translation and publishing of the Bible stories and New Testament. The committee decided to support the stories and assigned Linda Maendel to write them. The Hutterian Brethren Book Centre, a supplier of German, Hutterite and Anabaptist books to colonies and their schools, would publish the stories (see “They’re Here!”, pg. 4).

**A Hutterite girl takes her turn polishing the communal dining room door panels at Acadia Colony west of Winnipeg, Man. Why do Hutterites keep things so spotless? Minister Arnold Hofer says it is based on a philosophy: “Reinlichkeit ist ein Stück von Saligkeit” – “Cleanliness is a part of salvation.”**





It has taken Wycliffe personnel, such as Dick Mueller (left), many years of patient relationship building with Hutterites to find interest and support for Hutterisch translation. Though at first unsure, Arnold Hofer (right), who heads an education committee for a more progressive segment of Schmiedeleut Hutterites in Manitoba, now welcomes translation of Bible stories.



## Divine Provision

Committee head Arnold Hofer, a Hutterite minister, had initial doubts about the idea of translation into a language that is used in everyday life. As well, he says, more Hutterite colonies are greatly upgrading school instruction of German.

However, Hofer eventually warmed to the proposal from Mueller and Knauber for the Hutterisch Bible storybook series.

“After visiting with them, and also hearing the interest of some of our people . . . I could see that we could use it,” says the minister. “It could uphold a language which has been used for almost 450 years. I feel we should support it, to help us to communicate on our colonies, and also it could help to strengthen our faith.”

Mueller sees God’s provision of these relationships to support production of the Hutterisch Bible stories.

“I’m sure it was the Lord’s timing,” says Mueller. “Now we are working with a group that is backing the work and a group that’s handling the publishing and the distribution.”

Hofer has been asked to be on a translation committee of Hutterites who will help check the translation for an audio New Testament (see “The e-Book is Coming,” pg. 18). Still, he is somewhat leery about moving away from Luther’s Bible.

“I would be very cautious with this. Yes, I would,” he says. “When you look at modern translations, even German modern translations . . . some of them are quite different. So the danger could be that interpretation of Scripture could change.

“I don’t feel that it will be necessary for us to use it in Sunday school or worship,” he says of his own Schmiedeleut group. “I feel it will be more necessary for our homes and kindergarten, and also in our elementary level of German school.”

Mueller says it is understandable that many Hutterites, known for being very traditional, are hesitant about Hutterisch Scriptures.

“It doesn’t really mean much to you until you see Scripture in Hutterisch, and see if it can be helpful or not.”

Hutterites will soon get that opportunity. 🍀

Mueller sees God’s provision of these relationships to support production of the Hutterisch Bible stories.

Members of Acadia Colony attend the daily evening church service led by their minister, Arnold Hofer, in German. In research done by Wycliffe, many Hutterite lay people indicated they don’t understand German very well, hence the suggestion for Bible translation into their Hutterisch mother tongue.

