

# CELLING THE WORLD

*Translated Scriptures on hand phones are getting an enthusiastic response in Timor.*



**B**y a courtyard-facing hallway at Christian University in Kupang, West Timor, Wycliffe's Barbara Grimes and several colleagues set up a table covered with Bibles, CDs and Christian reference books—translated into various languages of the region. Husband Chuck has already gone to guest lecture at an early morning theology class, where Timor's heat and humidity will drench him in perspiration.

Beside this hallway distribution table from the Language and Culture Unit of the Evangelical Protestant Church of Timor (GMIT), is colleague Rani Therik. Taking up much less room, the unusually tall, 34-year-old Timorese man powers up a laptop computer and starts a software program or two.

He is preparing for a much different kind of distribution of God's Word to interested university students. It will happen invisibly and absolutely free of charge.

Even before Chuck Grimes vocally advertises the distribution to his pupils, others from among the 550 theology students here stroll by between classes, stopping to peruse the table and buy some items. They are intrigued with the materials, including those translated into Kupang Malay, the first local language in the region to have a New Testament through the Language and Culture Unit's efforts (see story, pg. 6).

"Some are saying, 'Oooh, that's our language,'" says Barbara Grimes, overhearing the gathering crowd. "If they grew up in Kupang, Kupang Malay is their language."

Rani begins interacting with the passersby too. Dealing with one student at a time, Rani pushes a few buttons on his laptop and their phones. Wirelessly and in a few blinks time, each student has the entire Kupang Malay New Testament (plus Genesis)—on his or her cellphone.

"It usually takes 10 seconds," says Rani. "It's a pretty small file—only 633 kilobytes. It's very good, simple software."

Rani gives each recipient a quick orientation to these electronic Scriptures (including finding where they ended up, since each phone stores them differently). He also shares his email address, in case they have questions or problems later.

This day, at least 20 smiling students walk away with God's Word on their cellphones. The little distribution session is part of a strategy in this southeast corner of Indonesia to make translated Scriptures and other materials as accessible as possible by digital means, via CDs, the Internet and cellphones.

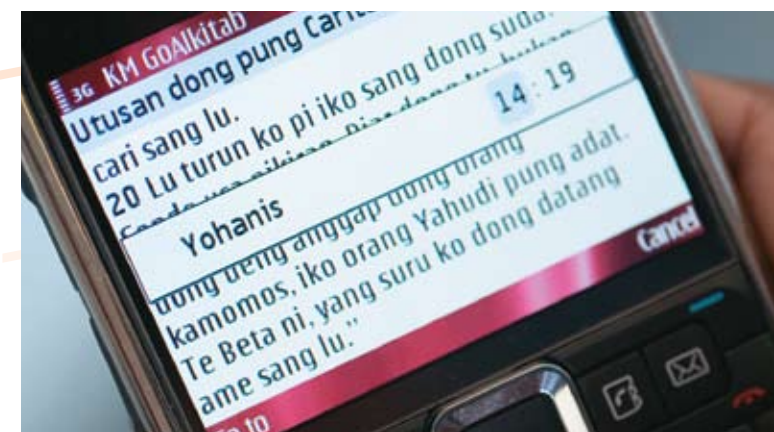
## DOING SOMETHING

But what's the big attraction about cellphone Scriptures?

"Any method we can use to spread the Word of God is great," says Rani, who adds that the Indonesian Bible is already available on hand phones.

Most everyone, especially the younger generation in Timor, seems to own a mobile phones, which are often more dependable than traditional landlines, says Rani.

Rani Therik (above, left) helps a student at the Christian University in Kupang, West Timor, get familiar with using the Kupang Malay New Testament, just downloaded on his cell phone (right).



“People rely a lot on mobile phones here, I guess, in this part of the world.”

According to some sources, cellphones outnumber landline phones more than four to one here. You don’t have to look far to see the technology’s influence. Across the sprawling Christian University campus, dotted with palm and coconut trees, a group of students sits on the edge of a cement-walled flowerbed. As they laugh and chat with one another, many have their eyes and fingers locked on their phones.

Several of the students for whom Rani downloaded the Kupang Malay New Testament are quick to explain their interest in it.

“We take our phone everywhere: on the public transportation, at home—so wherever we are, we can read it [God’s Word],” says one female student. “And especially since it’s in the Kupang language, it’s easier to understand.”

Another young woman says Christians commonly send Scripture verses in cellphone messages to other people to encourage and challenge them, especially on Sundays. “We can do something with God’s Word,” she explains.

Rani says he is noticing Timorese referring to God’s Word on their cellphones at Bible studies and church services. “It’s not really common yet for people to use that in church, but you see more and more people do it already.”

#### CELLPHONE LOVE STRUCK

The love affair with cellphones in Indonesia is what got Wycliffe’s Stuart Cameron to initiate the effort to distribute translated Scripture in the format as part of the Timor region language cluster project. Cameron, an Australian, has watched the situation since serving as translation adviser to the Helong language team, which is part of a cluster of translation projects in Timor (see “Foreword,” pg. 2). In many ways, he says, developing nations are using cellphone technology far more extensively and effectively than developed countries.

“Ever since mobile phones or hand phones or cellphones came into Indonesia, people have just fallen in love with them . . . Even your motorcycle taxi driver has a phone. He might even have two!” says Cameron. “It’s almost like *“It’s almost like the most important thing you can have is a cellphone. It’s just remarkable.”*

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“I guess in the back of my mind was this unconscious thought of *how can we utilize that?*, but not really knowing what to do.”

In early 2009, while attending a Wycliffe conference in Australia, Cameron heard colleagues from Eurasia make a presentation. They casually mentioned that putting translated Scriptures on cellphones was a great distribution alternative in their sensitive area, where borders may be closed to printed books.

Hearing about cellphone Scripture in use elsewhere prompted Cameron to research the idea in earnest for the Timor region. On the Internet, he discovered the relatively new *Go Bible* application. Written by an Australian, it runs on most mobile phones.



It was free upfront, required no royalty payments for ongoing use, could be freely modified for the projects in Timor and handled unusual scripts.

As a former geologist and now a Wycliffe translator/linguist, Cameron took on the challenge of making the files from the local translators run on cellphones with *Go Bible*.

“At first it was a struggle, but I had success in the end,” he says. “I actually had to write something that would convert our files into the right form that could be imported into this package and then figure out how to get it onto phones.”

#### WHERE’S THE REST?

Cameron sent some test samples of Kupang Malay Scriptures to the translation office staff in Kupang. The Timorese were completely thrilled with the idea, using them immediately in Bible studies as well as preaching from cellphones. And, they asked, “Where’s the rest of the New Testament?”

Besides Kupang Malay, Scripture portions and hymn books from other local languages in the Timor region have been tested on *Go Bible*. And in Australia, adds Cameron, the Kriol Bible is now running on *Go Bible* for Aborigines there. Rani, a civil engineer who does emergency relief work with the United Nations, but volunteers freely with GMIT’s Language and Culture Unit, has helped Cameron in these efforts.

Some might see cellphone Scriptures as gimmicky, admits Cameron. But ease of use and accessibility is at the core of why they are popular, especially for younger generations.

“It’s funny, because if I talk to a 20-year-old, they say, ‘Why wouldn’t you?’ It’s just a generational thing.”

The future goal in Timor for releases of newly translated Scriptures will always include cellphone technology as part of a mix of formats, says Cameron. “It’s now got to be in print form, we put it on the Internet, and we have the mobile phone form and a stand-alone CD form. “It’s just the way things have to be done now. . . . It’s just the way of the future.”

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(Opposite) Cell phones outnumber landline phones more than four to one in the Indonesia region, so transmission towers are a common sight, even in some outlying rural areas of Timor. The population’s love affair with cellphones (right) grabbed the attention of Wycliffe’s Stuart Cameron, adviser to the Helong Bible translation team (above, with translator Misriani Balle—see “Foreword,” pg. 2). He initiated finding ways to distribute Scriptures onto the devices, with a great response.