An Intertwining of Ministries

An account of productive relationships between two significant Christian enterprises in their impact on world missions in the twentieth century.

Forward

Stimulated by interest exhibited by current John Brown University personnel, I have undertook the production of this account as an emeritus JBU faculty member who was present as a potential student on the campus of Siloam Springs when preparations were underway at Sulphur Springs for the first summer camp devoted to the linguistic training of potential translators. Although never a translator myself, I became intimately associated with various aspects of the histories of both enterprises. Another element meaningful to me personally is the fact of several ways in which my own family members have been involved.

Grateful recognition is due those people who have assisted in producing this account. Dr. Kenneth Pike, longest-tenured SIL translator, contributed toward title composition. Mrs. Joe (Tarver) Smith, an early Brown School student at Sulphur Springs, has assisted in verifying details. My wife, Margaret, a JBU graduate and the current president of Siloam Springs Writers, has been a most helpful collaborator.

Rogene O. Weathers

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A Place of Beginning

Standing silently beside the highway near the center of the small northwest Arkansas town of Sulphur Springs, an unpretenuous marker bears testimony to the humble beginning of a movement that now encircles our planet. Its inscription leads with the words, “What mean these stones?” taken directly from a memorable biblical account. The inscription identifies the time and place of beginning and also characterizes the significance of the work. Thus the focus of thorough training in descriptive linguistics as preparation for recording the Holy Scriptures into the “heart language” of all peoples on the earth became a reality at this seemingly unlikely location under similarly unpredictable circumstances.

The relating of the initiative of an Iowa-born evangelist to that of two California-born Christian brothers established a unique setting that has led to thousands of dedicated Christian men and women becoming involved in this most significant enterprise. Although inevitably assisted in various ways by many others, these three men were the key personalities whose lives initially converged as God was leading.

In 1896, at age seventeen, John Elwerd Brown and his brother Ben, moved from Iowa to Benton County, Arkansas, settling at Rogers. Following his conversion, young Elward became a member of a traveling Salvation Army team and eventually affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal Church,
South. At age twenty-one, he was asked to serve as president of Scarritt Collegiate Institute at Neosho, Missouri. This experience stimulated his interest in preparing young people for Christian service and was a significant factor in leading him to found the institution that eventually became John Brown University.

After he had settled in Siloam Springs, near the southwest corner of Benton County, the reputation of the young evangelist and potential educator continued to grow. He was called on to preach throughout the southern half of the United States and extensively in California. By 1919 his vision of a school to train “head, heart and hand” had materialized into what was known for several years as John E. Brown College, enrolling young people of limited financial means “but rich in character and zeal” to prepare them to serve others.

In 1917, at age twenty-one, William Cameron Townsend, raised in Southern California, decided to serve God as a Bible salesman in Guatemala. Numerous writers have chronicled his story. His younger brother, Paul, later joined him in his work in Guatemala. Little has been written about Paul’s service to the Lord. Ironically, the Lord’s leading in Paul Townsend’s life eventually had a significant impact on the enterprise founded by his older brother.

During the 1920s and early 1930s several developments took place. Programs were established and buildings were built on the campus of the young John E. Brown College at Siloam Springs. The financial responses to John Brown’s evangelistic ministry enabled him to buy the formerly prosperous Kihlberg Hotel with more than 100 acres of adjacent real estate at Sulphur Springs. In Guatemala, Cameron Townsend turned from selling Bibles to translating the New Testament for an Indian tribe. Paul Townsend served in Guatemala with his brother for a time before shifting to service at a mission school, the Presbyterian Industrial College, in Guatemala City. About that same time Cameron Townsend was aware of the reputation of the John Brown Schools, and he encouraged his Cakchiquel language helper, Joe Chicol, to enroll as a student in the high school program at John E. Brown College in Siloam Springs. Echoes of these occurrences influenced the establishment and curse of worldwide Bible translations for many years.

In 1933, while Paul and Laura Townsend were on furlough from work at the mission school in Guatemala, word came to them that the school would be closed because of conditions there. This meant the termination of a livelihood for them. As they prayed about their next step, a radio broadcast caught their attention. In California, John Brown was describing the ministry of the Julia A. Brown School for Children (JABSC) at Sulphur Springs, Arkansas. He emphasized a need for additional staff personnel at the school. Paul offered his services and was employed.

In the spring of 1934, Paul Townsend’s residency at Sulphur Springs attracted Cameron and his wife, Elvira, to that community. Because of health needs being experienced by both Cameron and Elvira, the availability of Dr. George Bast, a naturopathic physician, was an additional attraction. When Dr.
Bast and his wife opened their home to provide lodging as well as health care over an extended time, the Townsends gladly accepted the courtesy.

In his search for a suitable location for the training of linguistics, it was only natural that Cameron would consider possibilities in the Sulphur Springs community. Breezy Point, a short distance from the Bast home, was eventually selected and utilized. This obscure location, very near the extreme northwest corner of Arkansas, became the point of origin for the joint Summer Institute of Linguistics and Wycliffe Bible Translators movements (SIL/WBT).

A few miles to the south, vital relationships were formed with Christian and business people in the town of Gravette, Arkansas. Tom Haywood, a prominent hardware merchant, proved to be an enduring friend and benefactor to both the Julia A. Brown School and Camp Wycliffe. In keeping with the modest circumstances of the first Camp, he donated empty nail kegs to be used for seating. As the years passed, his material input and the participation of many of his neighbors and friends were felt in dramatic ways.

Early Observations

As a Missouri-born farm boy I graduated from high school in 1929. During the following four-and-a-half years I remained on the farm with my parents and consistently wished for a way to attend college. Eventually, I was advised to “write to John Brown, who takes boys and girls without money.” In January 1934, having followed that advice, I broke away from my boyhood home and made my way to Siloam Springs to see if I really would be able to attend John E. Brown College – in preparation for possible service as a foreign missionary.

I found John Brown to be eager to help “worthy boys and girls” obtain a college education. When he offered me the opportunity to serve for a semester as a full-time worker at the school to build up some advance credit prior to enrolling in classes at the beginning of the summer, I promptly accepted it.

As a dormitory resident on campus, I soon became aware of the newly formed Missionary Volunteer Band. That year the band was influential in establishing the institution’s tradition of an annual Missionary Conference. The speakers that year were Dr. Harvey Farmer of the North Africa General Mission and Karl Hummel of the Central American Mission. A missionary banquet was also held in connection with the conference.

Sometime after the conference I had the privilege of attending a regular college chapel service in which a visitor was introduced. This was my first exposure to someone personally involved in Bible translation. The visitor, Cameron Townsend, was introduced as “the brother of Paul Townsend,” who was a member of the Brown school staff at Sulphur Springs. It was explained that he had translated the New Testament into one of the Indian dialects in Guatemala, and that he would be heading a training camp at Sulphur Springs
that summer. The camp would be preparing workers to employ the science of descriptive linguistics in Bible translation. It was also mentioned that Joe Chicol, a Cakchiquel Indian from Guatemala, who was present in the audience as a sophomore student at John E. Brown College, had helped the visitor in his translation of the New Testament into Cakchiquel.

In June of that year, John E. Brown College was reincorporated into John Brown University and I was enrolled for my first semester of college study. The university’s observance of that year’s Fourth of July holiday included dismissing classes and offering students an outing to Sulphur Springs for the day. As one feature of the day “Brother Brown” conducted a special service in the Bible Conference Tabernacle located in the Sulphur Springs City ark. Among the guests introduced at the service were the faculty and students who constituted the linguistics training camp. This was my second exposure to the enterprise that became the Summer Institute of Linguistics and it also served as a second opportunity for me to observe something of the relationship that existed between John Brown and the university and Camp Wycliffe’s early days.

Though not a thing I personally observed, I find that James and Marti Hefley in their book, *Uncle Cam*, relate the encounter in 1934 between Cameron Townsend and Amos Baker, a widower and a patron of the Julia A. Brown School for Children (JABSC) at Sulphur Springs. A result of this encounter was a lifetime friendship between the two men and subsequently Amos Baker’s continuing involvement with Wycliffe Bible Translators. Shortly after the men’s second encounter in 1935, Baker married Delta Garlock, a former John E. Brown College student who he met as a member of the faculty of JABSC, where his children had been enrolled. Delta became a vital member of his “support team.” This formed another link in the relationships nourished by the common threads of Brown-Wycliffe interests.

The third such relationship I observed occurred during the Second Annual Missionary Conference on the campus of John Brown University in the spring of 1935. Karl Hummel of the Central American Mission (CAM) had been a speaker at the first conference in 1934 and one of the speakers in 1935 was Cameron Townsend, who had been associated with Central American Mission when he went to Guatemala in 1917 as a Bible salesman.

A Shifting in Locale

With the increase of Camp Wycliffe attendance in 1935, a more desirable place to hold the 1936 camp was explored. An interim answer was found in the availability of a country schoolhouse about two miles north of Siloam Springs. Though that location served the purpose for that summer, another location was sought for the 1937 camp. It was found that the facilities at the Arkansas Baptist Assembly Grounds, just southeast of Siloam Springs, could be used after their normal seasonal use by the Baptists of Arkansas. Obviously,
this was not in any way under the control of John Brown University (JBU), but being in the same community placed the camp into much closer proximity to JBU. This provided easy access and therefore a considerable amount of common activity between the two enterprises.

Limited use of that facility was continued through the next two years with a certain degree of interrelation between the camp, the city of Siloam Springs and the JBU campus. By now, JBU faculty members and students, as well as additional support from among Siloam Springs residents, were beginning to be drawn into the translation enterprise and related activities – particularly into Mexico. One special occurrence at that time was a presentation to Cameron and Elvira Townsend of a gift from President Cadenas of Mexico, a Chevrolet automobile purchased through a Siloam Springs firm.

Tom Trowbridge, a Siloam Springs realtor, became a devoted helper and benefactor to the Summer Institute of Linguistics cause during those years and even made at least one support trip to Mexico with members of the group. In fact, he became involved with Cameron Townsend in promoting the 1938 activation of what was to become the Inter-American Service Brigade (I-ASB). My brother, Kenneth, attended Camp Wycliffe as a JBU graduate that summer and went to Mexico as part of the initial I-ASB group that fall. Years later when he neared retirement, Ken was asked to produce a report of the Brigade’s activities, as they conceivably could have impacted the early developments within the Summer Institute of Linguistics and Wycliffe Bible Translators. Copies of that report, “Some Intimate Observations Relating to the Short-lived Inter-American Service Brigade,” are on file in the archives of WBT/SIL and of JBU.

After being held near Siloam Springs for four years, Camp Wycliffe – becoming generally known as Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) – was returned to Sulphur Springs to be held at John Brown Academy for the 1940 and 1941 sessions. With its increased recognition as an educational entity, the Institute was attracted toward college campuses. This led to its first session at the Norman campus of the University of Oklahoma (U of O) in 1942. That arrangement was interrupted for two years during World War II, and the 1934 and 1944 sessions were held on the Bacone College campus at Muskogee, Oklahoma.

Beginning again in the summer of 1945, the Norman campus of the U of O served for many years as SIL’s principal location; however, branches soon began to be established in other domestic and foreign locations.

SIL’s removal from Arkansas did diminish the contacts with JBU, but a substantial relationship continued and numerous JBU graduates became associated with the translation enterprise in various fields and roles throughout the world.
A Return to Arkansas

The time came when the usefulness of the Sulphur Springs property to the John Brown schools had diminished to the point that it was available for sale. In the absence of an actual geographic base location owned by Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT) and because of the ongoing relationships of the two enterprises, the possibility of WBT becoming the new owner was considered. A plan for the transfer of ownership was worked out and put into effect. For a number of years the properties provided a home for children of WBT/SIL members, certain office functions, a place for temporary residences of WBT/SIL people on furlough and Biennial Conferences – particularly for the Mexico Branch.

While Wycliffe Bible Translators owned the Sulphur Springs property, its proximity to Siloam Springs encouraged a renewed interrelationship between WBT and JBU and a considerable exchange of participation in activities. WBT people attended services held on the JBU campus and JBU people attended special events held at the WBT property in Sulphur Springs. Some WBT people even enrolled in classes at JBU and commuted from Sulphur Springs.

On one occasion when a group of WBT leaders met at Sulphur Springs, Cameron Townsend arranged for and carried out “an auto cavalcade” to Siloam Springs to convey an expression of gratitude to John Brown for favors extended to WBT. Wycliffe members presented tokens of appreciation in the form of selected objects – tools, spears, etc. – representing various cultures in which Bible translations were being produced.

During the ownership of the property by WBT, it was recognized in 1959 that twenty five years had elapsed since the first Camp Wycliffe was held in that community in 1934. It was decided that appropriate recognition of the years of progress could be given by erecting a suitable memorial on the property, adjacent to the highway. The basic structure for the Memorial Marker was constructed in a semi-pyramidal form, using stones from what had been the foundation of the building at Breezy Point which had served the camp in 1934. With space provided by means of painted metal panels that were attached to the base, an inscription was composed and painted onto the panels. The inscription read:

WHAT MEAN THESE STONES
(Joshua 4:21)
THESE STONES FROM THE FOUNDATION OF A FARM HOUSE AT BREEZY POINTS,
ONE MILE WEST OF THIS SPOT, WHERE THE FIRST SUMMER INSTITUTE OF LINGUISTICS
(CAMP WYCLIFFE)
WAS HELD JUNE-SEPTEMBER 1934,
STAND HERE AS A MEMORIAL TO GOD’S
FAITHFULNESS. FROM THAT SMALL BEGINNING, 
WITH ONLY TWO STUDENTS, HAS GROWN 
THE PRESENT INSTITUTE WITH BRANCHES ON 
THREE CONTINENTS, TEACHING HUNDREDS OF 
STUDENTS ANNUALLY TO ANALYZE STRANGE 
LANGUAGES. FROM THAT BEGINNING CAME ALSO 
THE 
WYCLIFFE BIBLE TRANSLATORS, INC., 
DEDICATED TO TRANSLATING THE TRANSFORMING 
WORD OF GOD INTO ALL LANGUAGES OF THE 
WORLD. 
“HITHERTO HATH THE LORD HELPED US” 
(I SAM. 7:12) 
HE WILL ENABLE US TO FINISH THE TASK. 
“TWO THOUSAND TONGUES TO GO”

The structure still stands on a 57-foot by 37-foot plot 
retained by WBT when the property was sold, but the original 
inscription deteriorated years ago. With the operational center 
for WBT having been established in California after the sale of 
the Arkansas property, there was no ongoing maintenance 
provided for the marker. However, its condition was drawn to 
my attention in 1970 and I was permitted to arrange for its 
renovation.

Ongoing Collaborations

In the early days (1930s), and through the succeeding years, many JBU faculty members, students, and graduates have become participants in WBT/SIL activities either as regular members or for short terms on special assignments. WBT personnel have ministered on the JBU campus from time to time in various ways, sometimes during furloughs. Of those who went to SIL/WBT endeavors from JBU, a few names come to mind at once. Joyce Jenkins had been a student at John E. Brown College and was on the JBU faculty at the time of the first Camp Wycliffe. She later became the first to leave that role to join the ranks as translator. The first JBU graduate to attend Camp Wycliffe in preparation for going to Mexico was Kenneth Weathers. He served first in a supportive role but later became a translator. Hazel Spotts was the first JBU graduate to attend camp and go directly into translation work.

The continuing list of those who have had connections with both JBU and SIL/WBT includes – among “old timers” – such notables as: Hayden Austin, Pat Bonnell, Roger Garland, John Garst, Beverly Holcomb, Martin Huyett, Ilo Leach, Helen Neuenswaner and Mary Shaw. This obviously is only a brief sampling and to chronicle the roles and accomplishments of even these few would require many pages. The number of
additional JBU graduates who have been involved in SIL/WBT, together with their children who have enrolled as students at JBU, is obviously impressive. Adding the list of JBU-student children of SIL/WBT personnel not previously related to JBU increases the number remarkably. To list all of these and describe their roles and accomplishments would constitute a major task, considerably beyond the scope of this account. It perhaps is worth noting, however, that both Roger Garland and Martin Huyett have held, and still hold, positions of high visibility and responsibility in the enterprise, having exhibited remarkable adaptability.

What might be identified as “a reciprocal ministry” in illustrated by the relationships between JBU students and the many Wycliffe people who have ministered to them in classes and conferences. A tradition students have followed for many years has been to carry out an annual missionary project consisting of taking offerings to be placed into funds in support of particular needs of missionaries – frequently those serving WBT. One such unique project was directed to the support of Manuel Arenas, a Totonac Indian from Mexico and a Wycliffe related speaker at the 1967 Missionary Conference. He has assisted Herman Aschmann, whose wife had been a JBU student, in translating the New Testament in Totonac. Among the things Manuel related to those attending the conference was that he was launching the building of a school in his native territory for the education of his Totonac people. His intent was to provide education that would not “wean them away” from service to their tribal people – as education outside their tribal culture often would. This so captivated the students’ interest that it was decided to designate the 1967-1968 project toward the building of Manuel’s school.

As JBU’s fall semester began that year, the students conceived and adopted the idea of going beyond the raising of money. Accordingly, a group of students – twelve men and four women – gave up time with their families during the Christmas vacation in order to travel to Mexico to help build the school. The group referred to the trip as “Operation Totonac,” and also invited me to provide a vehicle and accompany them. By accepting the invitation, I, accompanied by my wife, was able to spend Christmas day with my brother, Kenneth, in the Mexico City area. We then spent two days on a visit to Tetelcingo, where Ken had lived and worked as a neighbor to Cameron and Elvira Townsend.

About three years after Operation Totonac, I was granted a leave from JBU and was invited to join the effort at Dallas to prepare for the building of the International Linguistics Center (ILC). One responsibility I accepted was to oversee the operation of the regional office of WBT. This enabled John McIntosh, who had been serving as regional representative, to take the oversight of construction work at the center’s property. Prior to the construction of the permanent buildings, one task I had was to oversee the move of the regional office from downtown Dallas into a portable building set up on the center’s property in preparation for the start of regular construction operations.
A JBU student missionary project in 1963-1964, a few years prior to the one described above, accumulated about $3,000, which was designated to assist two JBU graduates serving WBT. One-third of the amount was directed to Norma Gene Smith, daughter of Dr. Earl C. Smith, a long-time Professor of Bible at JBU. The other two-thirds was directed to my brother, Ken, and his wife, Nadine. They used it in the purchase of a 1964 Chevrolet carryall that served them throughout their lifetime. The vehicle still is in service and is in possession of one of their daughters.

Another occurrence involving our family was the New York World’s Fair, which my daughter, Donna, and I were able to attend, being housed as guests at the group house used by Wycliffe people in Flushing, New York. Donna had returned home from Beirut, Lebanon in view of her mother’s serious illness and was present at the time of her death. Her return to Beirut coincided with the opportunity we had to be guests at Flushing. With her first baby, David, she was assigned a room in the group house, one temporarily vacated by Manuel Arenas during the time he was away for dental treatment. Manuel had been serving as one of the staff members assigned to the Wycliffe-operated “Pavilion of 2,000 Tribes” at the Fair, where Peruvian Shapra Chief Tariri’s conversion was featured on a 100-foot mural. The mural was later used at various other exhibitions.

Some years after my retirement, I was invited to participate in organizing and carrying out the 1984 event at Sulphur Springs commemorating a half-century of SIL/WBT operations. A part of the event was held at Breezy Point, where only a few stones remained of the foundation of the building used by the first Camp Wycliffe. Other parts of the event were held on property that formerly had been owned by the John Brown Schools and later by Wycliffe Bible Translators.

Another, more recent development in which I’ve been involved since retirement has been increased activity with Wycliffe Associates, Inc., a lay organization established to provide a wide variety of services in support of WBT/SIL. It has been my privilege to assist in the establishment of Arkansas’ first Wycliffe Associates (WA) chapter which has been named the Camp Wycliffe Memorial Chapter, in recognition of its location in the area distinguished as the beginning point for WBT/SIL’s worldwide translation enterprise. Among other things, the chapter serves as custodian of the memorial marker at Sulphur Springs.

Since the formation of that Chapter of WA, an event in my personal life has proved to relate specifically to both JBU and WBT. In view of the deaths of both my children’s mother and their first stepmother, a JBU graduate, and the former Mrs. Walt (Margaret) Siemens, agreed to become my children’s second stepmother. Through the years, our families have had many common interests and experiences, and Walt served for several years as Dean of Students at JBU. As a WA member listed on its hospitality roster, Margaret has had the privilege over the years of having many SIL/WBT parents as overnight guests in her home when they have been in Siloam Springs in connection with their children’s enrollments at JBU.
For about a decade, another JBU faculty member, Andrew Bowling, my son-in-law, has spent six weeks of his summer each year in Dallas, teaching Hebrew for translators at the SIL held at the ILC. His wife, Donna, my daughter, a JBU graduate and a professional librarian, has accompanied him and worked in the library at the Center. Now retired, Andy will continue to serve WBT/SIL indefinitely at the ILC as a volunteer member of the regular faculty of the newly formed Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics (GIAL). Also retired, Donna will be serving as a volunteer part-time assistant librarian in the GIAL Library.

While it would be fruitless to try to predict what relationships will characterize the future, the intertwining of the ministries of JBU and SIL/WBT throughout the past sixty-five years obviously is a testimony to our Lord’s use of instruments yielded to Him.

About the Author

Dr. Rogene Weathers served JBU in various capacities during the period 1934 to 1975. The positions he held included: Instructor in Printing and Journalist; Professor of Teacher Education; Dean of the Faculty; and Vice President for research and Planning in which role he initiated and directed the formulation of the statement which – throughout the past thirty years – has represented the university’s mission.

He has served Wycliffe Bible Translators as layman, supporter, advisor, regional representative, and an active member of Wycliffe Associates, Inc. As an associate, he was involved in the founding of the first Wycliffe Associates Chapter in the state of Arkansas in 1997. He also has been active in the Gideons International since 1943.