



THE IRVIN FAMILY

AMBASSADORS FOR CHRIST | LUCEDALE, MISSISSIPPI



PRAYER LETTER | JANUARY-MARCH 2025

What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.

Romans 3:1-2 (KJV)

The Luganda Bible Project: Bringing God's Word to Uganda

I do not believe it is a stretch to extend this idea to any people with the privilege of access to God's word. As we look to the early months of 2025, we reflect on the great blessing of having God's word available to us and the ongoing work to make it accessible to Ugandans.

The Historical Foundation of the Luganda Bible

The history of the Luganda Bible begins in the late 19th century when missionaries first ventured from the East African coast into the interior regions. The journey of bringing Scripture to Uganda commenced around 1875 when Henry Morton Stanley and his interpreter Dallington Maftaa prepared biblical selections for Kabaka Mutesa, the king of Buganda. This initial work, though limited to fragments of Bible texts in Swahili written in Arabic script, marked the first introduction of written Scripture in the region.

Alexander Mackay, who arrived in Buganda in 1878, was among the first to translate portions of Scripture directly into Luganda. Understanding that literacy was essential for spiritual growth, Mackay devoted himself to translation work, beginning with the Gospel of Matthew. His efforts laid the groundwork for what would follow.

The complete translation of the Bible into Luganda was accomplished through the diligent work of George Lawrence Pilkington, who arrived in Buganda in December 1890. Gifted with remarkable linguistic abilities, Pilkington worked alongside Baganda converts, including Henry Wright Duta Kitaakule, Sembera Mackay, and Samwili Mukasa. Within a remarkably short period, Pilkington and his team translated considerable portions of Scripture.

Their combined efforts resulted in the publication of the first complete Luganda Bible in 1896 by the British and Foreign Bible Society. This edition became affectionately known as the "Biscuit Bible" and represented a monumental achievement in bringing God's Word to the Baganda people.

The Need For Today

Today, the Luganda Bible stands as the second most widely read Bible in Uganda after English. Its significance extends beyond the Baganda people, as Luganda is widely understood across various language groups throughout the country. The Scriptures in Luganda have become a vital resource for churches, schools, and even prison ministries. In many regions of the country, multiple people groups with distinct languages are represented, and while they often cannot communicate well using their respective languages, they can typically understand Luganda. Aside from English, Luganda is a highly influential cultural phenomenon in Uganda.

Many Ugandans can read the King James Bible, and we rejoice over this reality, but still, far too many do not read, speak, or comprehend English in any way. This brings us to the need for an accurate copy of God's word in Luganda. A large portion of Uganda's population of nearly 50 million people either speak and read Luganda natively or can understand Luganda because it influences the region.

Furthermore, Pilkington's skills as a translator were considered great, but we may question his biblical understanding. As a gifted translator, he translated the bible directly from the 1881 Revised Standard Version. Not only that, but the final product was a sort of paraphrase that greatly lacked in accuracy. Some of the choices made were not simply bad, they were grievous or mind boggling. Of course, coming from the Revised Standard version, the standard errors abound, such as the removal of 1 John 5:7. A paraphrase of the RSV mingled with odd choices in terminology means that the final result can hardly be called the word of God, but at the moment, it's all they have.





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The Current Translation Work

While the Lord moved my family and me from Uganda to Mississippi, our work in Uganda continues. The Lord blessed me, in my time in Uganda, with the opportunity to invest in incredible young men. They are the heart and soul of the current work on the Luganda Bible. For my part, while teaching the History and Preservation of the Bible in Masaka, I was able to incorporate the history of the Luganda Bible into the course work. From that class, I used the rules given to the King James translators to create a process for the men in Masaka to follow. Soon after the class finished, the translation work began.

About one year in, the process was in place, the team was assembled, and I provided the funding. While it is a costly endeavor, in the end, Lord willing, we will be able to provide Luganda natives with an accurate copy of God's word. I wanted to take some time to introduce you to the men who have been working, quietly, behind the scenes, diligently, to bring the Bible to pass.

I start with Waibi Robert, my eyes, ears, and hands in Uganda. He is a trustworthy and hard-working young man who facilitates all of the administrative requirements that accompany the translation work. He informs me of any needs the translators have and reminds me of upcoming expenses. He is a huge help, which I am fortunate to have.

Next is Rutabagyisha Grosvenor, more commonly known as Gross. Brother Gross, in my estimation, is a young Timothy or Titus - a choice servant of Jesus Christ. He is an excellent young man. He is diligent in all that he does; when he wants to learn some new way to serve the Lord, he puts his hand steadfastly to the plow. Brother Gross is a street preaching machine, he loves to serve the Lord. Brother Gross lived on our property when we were in Uganda. We have a special love and concern for him. I am excited to see how the Lord uses this young man in the future.

Lenald Walugembe was the latest addition to the translation team and has proven to be a tremendous addition. Walugembe is zealous to serve the Lord, and in our time there, that zeal grew more intensely until he found himself deeply immersed in the translation work. Brother Walugembe and Brother Gross are the primary translators. For the past two years or more, they have spent eight to ten hours per day sitting at a desk, laboring to translate God's word accurately. And they do it with joy and diligence.

Musumba (Pastor Sserunjogi Paul has been a steadfast guide in this process. Musumba Paul works on the second level review, and he is part of the final review in the end for each book of the Bible. Kristin and I have known Musumba Paul since we first travelled to Uganda in 2016, nearly ten years ago now. He was serving in the Ssesse Islands, a series of islands in Lake Victoria that caught my attention and helped set my mind on Uganda, Africa. He is now the Pastor of Masaka Independent Baptist Church, and among other things, he labors diligently on the Luganda translation.

Musumba Ssebanja works with Musumba Paul on the second level translation. This brother always wears the sweetest smile. He has a unique skill in the translation and editing process, he has no relationship with the English Bible at all. This is important because while the Luganda Bible needs to be accurate, just as important is readability. His input gives us great insight into how the average Luganda reader might understand the translation work.

For the third level of review, two long-standing missionaries put their Luganda skills to work. The first of whom is Marlin Petersen. Brother Marlin is unbelievably thorough in his review process. The translators often appreciate his in-depth notes and very careful review. Brother Marlin has been a valuable asset to this team and project.

The final translator involved is missionary Keith Stensaas. Brother Keith and Mrs. Sally are not only great missionaries, but they have also been great friends. The love and concern they show for my children are often overwhelming. We are thankful for the Stensaas family. Brother Keith's knowledge, understanding, and ability in the Luganda language have grown exponentially since 2021. He also performs a third-level review, and his review provides very practical feedback that helps the translators with complexities that arise through cultural differences. Brother Keith has been in Uganda now for so long that he is often able to bridge those cultural gaps that might normally hinder understanding.

This is the team that God is using to give the Buganda people the chiefest of advantages. My part in this lot was primarily to get it started, keep it going, and finance the translators' needs. As the Lord provides for us, we provide for them. I asked brother Gross if there was anything in particular he wanted me to inform you, and this is what he said: "It is not easy and rather scary to handle the words of a King, but He has been gracious, patiently enlightening us in a number of difficulties. More than anything else, we need prayer; please pray for us."

So far, both translators (brother Gross and brother Walugembe) have completed the initial translation of the entire Bible. Now, they focus their time on the second and third levels of review. For the second level of review, they have made it as far as 1 Samuel. The third level of review is complete for the first few books of the Bible, and then each book will go through a collective review. This work is at a pivotal point in that the work that remains is the various reviews needed to complete the word of God in Luganda.



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My Upcoming Trip to Uganda and Rwanda

In May, it is my intention to fly to Uganda and Rwanda on a short trip. The purpose of this trip is multifaceted. First, to fellowship with the brethren in Uganda and check on the translators. Thus far, they have done well, with little input from others. They do their work, and they do it diligently of their own accord. But I do not want them to think we have forgotten about them. I am terrible at friendly communication, therefore, a visit to demonstrate their importance is merited.

Rwanda is a different story. The Lord has impressed upon the heart of a young family to serve Him there in Rwanda. To date, there are exactly zero Bible-Believing missionaries in Rwanda. The relationship that country has with missions is complex. I may be one of only a few people in the world who understands what's required to minister there legally, and therefore, I would like to be there as this family visits the country to provide any helpful feedback that may be needed. Rwanda, again recently, and for the second time in about five years, shut down thousands of Churches. The purpose for this is related to Rwanda's vision for the future of the country. They are called the Singapore of Africa for a reason; all businesses, including Churches, must meet certain codes and legal standards to exist and operate. This does make ministry in Rwanda difficult, but not impossible. If this family is willing to go through this difficult process, they could open the door for missions in Rwanda. Please pray this trip will be profitable!

Thomas, Kristin, Bethany, Adrian, and Shiloh Irvin
George County Baptist Church
Lucedale, Mississippi