

Recording the Gospel in every language: 6000 down; 4000 to go

Hanging on for dear life as the newly whipped up waves tossed about the dinghy transporting her and her plastic canoe drum containing her precious recording device to the remote Solomon Islands village of Tangarare, Sybil Shaw could suddenly think of better ways to travel.

But the tiny boat was her only option and not going to Tangarare wasn't an option. She was soaked, perhaps more than a little nervous in the rough sea, but she was intent on going through with what she had come to do.

A recordist with the Sydney office of the Global Recordings Network (GRN), the Epping Presbyterian Church member had gone to the Solomons with husband Alex, (then acting CEO) and newly arrived marketing and administration manager Dave Hughes to record some commentary in the Lengo and Gari languages to be used in the mission's work.

Alex was helping some of the local program leaders and Dave, as a newcomer to GRN, was getting some experience of the types of conditions people face in developing countries – and thus the kinds of challenges GRN faces in translating and presenting the Bible to them.

But for Sybil, the point of the exercise was to get some recordings of some local people reading passages from their own Bibles "into the can".

She had already endured a lengthy truck journey from Honiara to Vesale to board the vessel. After surviving the rough seas and arriving at her destination, she still found that getting those recordings wasn't going to be all smooth sailing.

"Luckily all my recording equipment was still dry, but it was so noisy in the village with the sea crashing and people around that we had to go into the hills to make the recordings," she says.

"And there we

had the background of hens, hornbills and other wildlife, but it was better than the sea".

She had allowed four days to record each language group and needed every hour.

Not that Sybil is any stranger to working in less than perfect conditions. She has been associated with GRN, (an interdenominational, evangelical, faith-based Christian mission based in Sydney's Castle Hill for 40 years.

With the aim to effectively communicate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to pre-literate and unreached people in their own language by means of recordings in every language (an estimated 10,000), GRN not only produces a range of audio and audio-visual materials for evangelism and Bible teaching - all supplied at or below cost, subsidized by the gifts of God's people – but also wind up recording devices. So far, it has recorded 6000 languages, with 4000 or more yet to obtain.

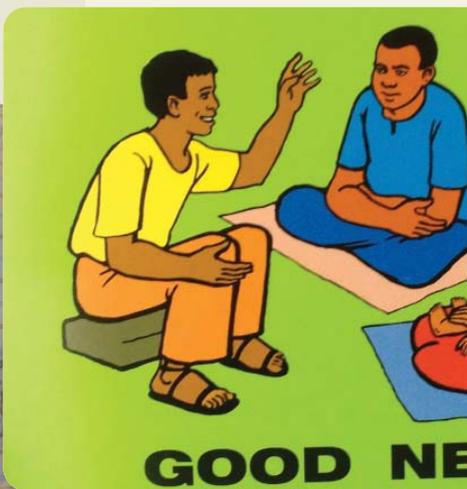
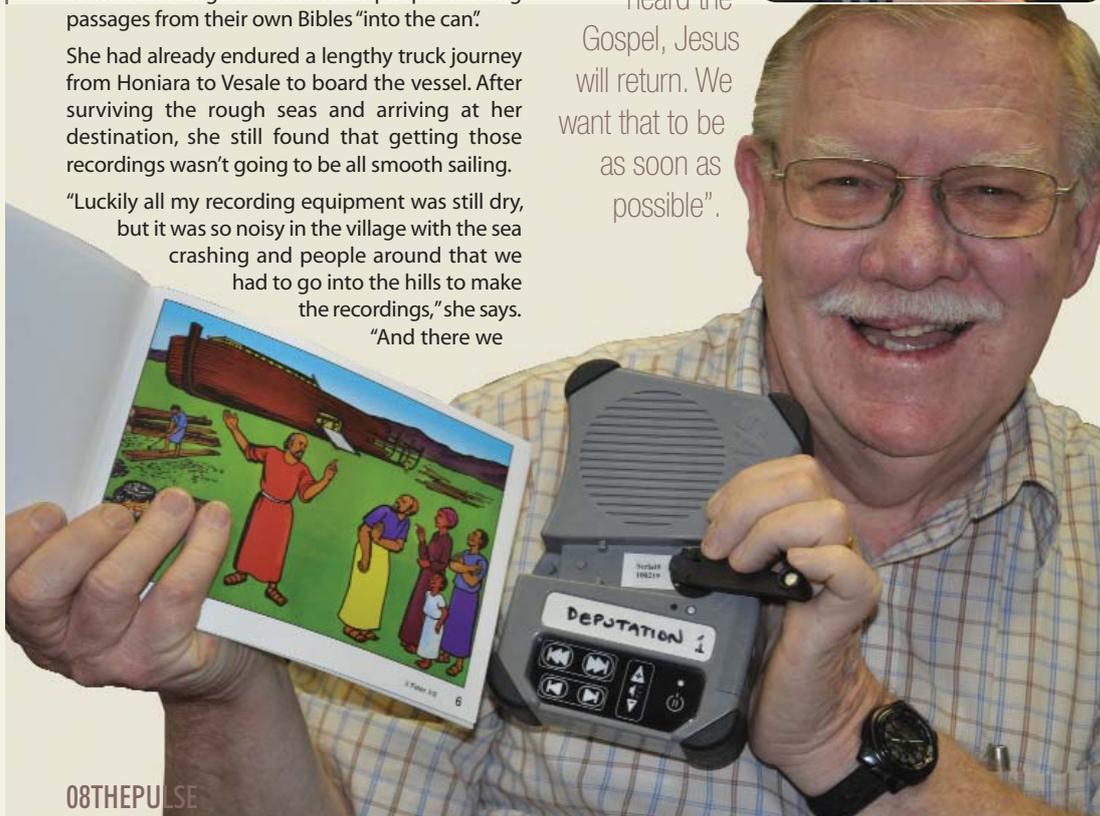
"It will be achieved in God's time," Alex says. "The Bible tells (Matthew 24:14) us that when all the people have heard the Gospel, Jesus will return. We want that to be as soon as possible".

Sybil and Alex worked as missionaries in India, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Solomon Islands, the Philippines and did training courses in Kenya, where their son was born, and Ghana before settling in Australia and joining the GRN team.

While a number of denominations are represented at GRN, like many of the 26 people working out of its Sydney office, they're Presbyterians.

"No staff are paid by GRN, but their positions are supported by the churches who send them to the organisation... they are being "sent" by their churches to do mission work with the organisation just like churches send people as missionaries overseas," Alex explains.

Alex is also Convener of Australian Presbyterian World Mission National (APWM) and secretary of APWM NSW so has his finger right on the pulse.



Incoming CEO Christine Platt has had previous experience with APWM, having done mission work via its partnership with SIM in Ecuador for over 10 years.

While some denominations have their own mission organisations which send their missionaries into the field, the mission's arm of the Presbyterian Church of Australia – Australian Presbyterian World Mission, or APWM National – has chosen to partner with “sending” mission organisations including GRN which is an APWM “approved” agency, based on its statement of faith, beliefs, principles and practice.

“APWM doesn’t have the resources to send missionaries overseas itself,” Alex says. “Specialised agencies do have the funding and the resources, so it makes sense to partner with them to help our people answer their call to do mission work.”

Working for GRN is similar to working for other mission organisations, except that much of the work is done back in the recording studio, office and factory in Sydney, with some trips overseas for recording and other purposes.

For example IT expert James Thomas (who with wife Christina attends Wentworthville Presbyterian) recently attended an international conference looking at new technologies for delivering Gospel recordings in developing countries via the internet and mobile phone networks. A “mobiles engineer”, the former Telstra employee of 14 years standing has been working for GRN for two years.

“I had always thought it would be wonderful to be able to use my technical skills to serve and when I heard about GRN through Reach Out I was very interested in coming to work here,” he said. “I did a Philippines mission for three months while at university and loved that, but didn’t think God would use my technical skills so went to work for Telstra.

“When I started at GRN it became clear that mobiles are an important future front for ministry. Our stats show that there are four billion active mobile phones in the world and seven billion subscriptions. We pay a lot for phone services in Australia but overseas it’s all prepaid and cheaper. People tend to top up their accounts for other family members, who use their mobile phones for internet, as torches, to play music, as compasses, cameras, etc. One device does the lot and it made sense for us to tap into that.”

Other Presbyterians at GRN include honorary treasurer (also NSW APWM treasurer) Ian Wallace from Epping Presbyterian, who is also a Trustee of the Presbyterian Church Property Trust in NSW; while Board chairman Mark Neasey is an Elder at Blacktown East Presbyterian Church and board member Naomi Tondl attends the same church.

Orders officer Andrew Frances, with wife Nellie, is another Epping Presbyterian member while staffer Helen Sadler is at Wentworthville Presbyterian and Wira and Debbie Dharma from Beecroft Presbyterian Church.

They are all passionate about the work of GRN and the passion is contagious. Visiting them in their office/recording

studios last month, The Pulse Editor found it difficult to leave!

GRN was established in America in 1939 by Quaker Joy Ridderhof, who had been a missionary in Honduras but had been ordered out of the mission field by medicos when she became very sick. During her recuperation, she spent her time listening to old records and came up with the idea of putting the Gospel onto records in Spanish and sending it back to the mission field, which she knew had a record player.

It wasn’t long before other people began to notice her work and ask her to record the Gospel in their languages. Records show she believed there might be 300 languages. Now, there are as many as 10,000 and the GRN of today – which came to Australia in 1952 – aims to get something out in every one of them, from the smallest to the largest language groups.

“Other missions have done similar things but tend to go to the larger and better known languages,” Alex says. “We are going from smallest and working up. They also tend to go to printed material, whereas we believe the oral component is very important so use playing devices which are designed specifically for the job and which will work in countries which do not have batteries or electricity.”

Joy unintentionally brought her organisation, and then called Buenas Nuevas (‘good news’ in Spanish) to Australia while en route to Papua New Guinea. A former Solomon missionary, Stuart Mill from Turrumurra, was aware of her ministry and when he realised she would be in the area, asked to accompany her. Joy’s vision was shared on that trip and Stuart started the second office in Sydney. Soon its name became Gospel Recordings (‘gospel’ means ‘good news’ in English) and the Australian office largely became the technical and support base. Now GRN has 34 country offices around the world.

“God brought in some amazing people with skills and abilities,” Alex says, “and there has been a lot of support for the organisation. Australians designed hand powered record players so the discs of Gospel recordings could be played in developing countries and a factory was established in Eastwood, now Macquarie Park, for them to be built. Over the years we have moved to cassettes and more recently to MP3 players...technology has moved on but God keeps moving people in who have a mastery of the skills we need.”

Called the Saber (Spanish, ‘to know’), these MP3 players have a micro SD card in them containing the appropriate material for the location and have a handle which can be wound for five minutes to power the device for up to around 20 minutes of playing. Saber has a two gigabyte memory providing 100 hours plus of listening and can download material from a computer or via Wi-Fi and has a good enough speaker system that the material can be played in group settings.

The devices work well for missionaries and local churches and are sold at cost of just \$60. Individuals can also buy them, with subsidies available, and Alex says they are highly valued by their owners.

One of the greatest moves has been the development of a website, 5fish, from which Gospel material in the 6000 plus languages can be downloaded onto computers (<http://5fish.mobi>) and also mobile phones.

Soon, a mobile phone application will be launched for android phones (iPhones, Alex says, aren’t as popular in developing countries).

“We realised that mobile phones are widespread, even in poorer countries, because they can be used for so many things – even to get a job – so it made sense to look at being able to provide our material in formats which can be downloaded,” Alex says.

“At the moment our team is developing a free app for kids which will be a series of Bible picture books. 5fish is already available and features evangelistic and simple Bible teachings.”

Currently 130,000 people a month are visiting the website, with 50,000 pages and 7000 hours of recordings downloaded each month.

Alex says Bible teaching is a very important process in mission and oral communication is the major focus rather than on printed material only. That said, GRN does provide a series of picture books which can be used to illustrate the oral material in any language.

“Our oral products provide short evangelistic Bible teaching messages which focus on particular teaching points, for example, ‘don’t be afraid,’” he says. “We find that every language group is fearful of something so with God commanding us not to be afraid. This is a good focus point for us.

“The first five of the eight books concentrate on Old Testament characters and New Testament teaching. Two are on the life of Christ and one on the book of Acts.

“The aim is to record sufficient material so a person can make a decision to come to faith in Christ, to then build up in faith and become active members of a church.”

Soon GRN Australia will move to new premises at Prospect, where there will be more office space, a bigger factory for building recording devices and six recording studios to provide state of the art digital editing and programming facilities.

As well as recording Gospel items, developing players and distributing the materials, GRN also provides short term mission opportunities, for example, for Bible college students.

Honorary treasurer Ian Wallace says these trips, which can run for up to a month, provide students without language skills the opportunity to experience the mission field and to share the Gospel using GRN products, after a short orientation period.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MOBILES MANAGER JAMES THOMAS DEMONSTRATES GRN’S NEW WEBSITE 5FISH ON A TABLET; THE PURPOSE DESIGNED SABER MP3 DEVICE WHICH HAS HAND POWERED BATTERIES; ACTING CEO ALEX SHAW WITH THE SABER AND A PICTURE BOOK THAT CAN BE USED WITH THE RECORDINGS; ONE OF THE TEXT-FREE BIBLE PICTURE BOOKS GRN HAS CREATED TO BE USED ACROSS ALL LANGUAGES. PHOTOS: KAREN THORNTON.

