THE GARDNER FAMILY: MISSIONARIES TO NIGERIA

- A Brief Biography -

By Steve Bissell, 2006

PREFACE

As our vehicle negotiated dirt roads and dried up riverbeds that led to our destination, red dust swirled around, penetrating our eyes and ears, and leaving our noses dry and bleeding. Somehow, I had forgotten how the harmattan winds blow sand from the ever-encroaching Sahara at this time of year.

Other memories, however, came unbidden. Painful things. Memories of leaving Nigeria 18 years before [in 1986], struck down by a mysterious illness that left me weak and bed-ridden with fever for weeks.

My husband Peter and I had responded to the need for a Bible translation in the Izere [ee-ZAY-ray] language, spoken by 50,000 people in Nigeria’s Plateau State. Local people built us a mud house where we could live, learn the language and lay the foundations for Scripture translation.

After only two years, though, my illness effectively terminated our career overseas. It left me with a profound sense of failure. We both felt we had achieved so little: an alphabet and literacy materials, some grammatical analysis and good relationships with the church and local people. But we had hoped to do so much more.

Last year [in 2003] we had the opportunity to return to Nigeria where Peter, now pastor of a large city centre church in Scotland, was to speak at a spiritual retreat for a group of Bible translators in Nigeria. Peter was keen to return to see how the Izere work had progressed. But me? Well, I had to face those painful memories. . . .

Nita Grainger, 2004
LOOKING BACK... AND LOOKING FORWARD

“My life is like a puzzle. When I left my home in Nigeria I left a piece, a very important piece, and when I left my friends, I left my heart and my spirit. And when I left the horses and animals and people on the street and beggars and just normal people, those were the most important pieces. The beggars made me feel so bad. I have a home and a warm family and clothes, and all they have is flip-flops, for their hands and feet are bare. And all they have for clothes is a rag. I am glad that I have friends and Jesus to protect me.”

So wrote Sarina, a seven year old missionary girl, after moving from Jos, Nigeria, to the United States of America with her family in 2005. Her parents, Richard and Janice Gardner, are Wycliffe Bible Translators who spent fourteen years living with the Afizere people of Nigeria to learn the Izere language in order to lead the effort to translate the Bible into Izere. It is now November, 2006, and the completed Izere New Testament was dedicated and distributed this month in Izereland. As the future continues to unfold, the Afizere people can now hear the Word of God in their heart language and understand for the first time what God has to say... to them.
WHERE DO MISSIONARIES COME FROM?

[Janice Gardner]

Born in Oregon, I became a Christian when I was 7 after a Sunday School teacher shared how a little boy in Africa gave his life to Jesus. I felt God’s great warmth and presence when I prayed. At Cedar Mill Bible Church we were always welcoming missionaries. I remember hearing from Luis Palau, Jan and Jerry Allen with Wycliffe and Rosie Roth in Nigeria in particular. In high school, I was encouraged to consider my life goals when I took a Sunday school class with Ron Morgan from CMBC (also a life-long friend of the family). We talked about investing our lives in things that are eternal rather than temporal. It struck something deep inside me that I felt was always there by God’s hand. I never wanted to pursue the usual life goals, job, marriage, a house.

As a college student I went to Portland State University and then transferred to Moore College of Art and Design in Philadelphia, PA, graduating in 1982 with a BFA degree in Advertising Design. I began working as a Graphic Design Specialist at an insurance company, but was still interested in missions and constantly looked for jobs overseas using my design skills.

I met Rich Gardner at a Bible Study. One of our first conversations was how he was interested in language and translating the Bible, but he wanted a better English translation at that time. When we decided to get married I had to trust God
that it was OK that he wasn’t interested in missions at that time.

What’s cool: when I was packing to go to Nigeria as a missionary, we were going through my parent’s attic and moving things in to storage. I found a paper I wrote in the 4th grade that talked about what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote how I wanted to live in Africa and share about Jesus there. I wanted to raise my kids in the fields with the sun.... I was stunned and amazed how God remembers dreams we forget about. I was on my way to Africa and had forgotten. It gave me confidence that God is in control. He remembers the heart of children and loves to reach out to the world however he can. I have been impressed with that more and more. His plans to reach people don’t fail.

Looking back I can see the path God used in my life to become a missionary, with the incredible influence of Sunday School teachers, family and relationships.

[Rich Gardner]

I was born in Philadelphia and grew up in a loving, but non-Christian family. When I was 20 I had a motorcycle accident that put me in the hospital for three months and recovery for almost nine months. When I went back to work, there was a man working there who was also studying at seminary. He shared the gospel with me and I received Christ. The next year I went to seminary and received an M.Div from Reformed Episcopal
Seminary in 1981. I then studied Hebrew for an undergraduate degree in Biblical Hebrew from Temple University in 1983, and after that went to Dropsie University and started a Ph.D in Old Testament.

I became tired of school and decided to see if I was interested in the Pastorate, so I took a summer intern job at a church in Portland, Oregon, where the girl I was dating was from, Janice Schlessler. During that summer of 1984 I saw that I wasn’t interested in the pastorate, but I was interested in Janice becoming my wife. So after returning to Philadelphia at the end of the summer, I again returned to Portland and married Janice in January, 1985.

Janice and I then found regular jobs to support our family. But after three years I started feeling uneasy that God had trained me at seminary; what was I doing with that education? So I thought about finishing a Ph.D, but our church, Cedar Mill Bible Church, had a missions conference, and Jerry Allen from Wycliffe Bible Translators spoke on the need for translations throughout the world. The Lord put this on my heart as a practical outlet for my Biblical and linguistic skills. So I talked it over with Janice and we agreed to pursue this.

In 1988 we went to Wycliffe’s introductory program called Quest in California. We were accepted there and soon on our way to joining the Wycliffe team.
A TIME OF PREPARATION

By August, 1989, Rich and Janice had been fully accepted as Wycliffe missionaries, and were attending SIL, the “Summer Institute of Linguistics,” in Eugene, Oregon. Rich wrote home after the first few weeks of schooling:

Tears and perspiration. Fatigue and anguish. Frustration and despair. Sounds like missionaries in a communist country or North Africa. Not quite! It's missionaries in Eugene, Oregon. 4-8 hours of homework each night, tending a family, devotions, pressure for grades, and more has produced in us such deep emotions! If it weren't for the prayers of God's people and the encouragement he gave us through them we would have given up! SIL is the first true realization that we can't do Bible translation in our own strength! As we finish the end of our first semester we are more excited about Bible translation. We are that much nearer to reaching a people group.

"Inter-Cultural Perspectives" was one of our classes. The objective of the course was to make us aware of our own cultural attitudes and to introduce us to other cultural situations.

One day we were told to pack our bags and bring money, etc., for a 3 day airport/plane trip experience. The setting: a third world airport, destination Kenya.

We were handed dolls to simulate children, approached by an over-eager and underdressed 'native' wanting to take our bags. (We didn't let him, and later regretted it.) We were shoved and pushed around, cut in front of by others who got special treatment (because
Rich and Janice did complete the SIL training, and after raising much prayer and financial support were able to relocate to Nigeria in December, 1990, and then to continue on to Cameroon for their final preparation for the work in
Africa. They wrote of those first weeks, with three small children (Dara, Brenton and Joelle), and Janice pregnant with her fourth, Lydia:

10 DAYS IN NIGERIA, 6 weeks in Yaounde, Cameroon, and now back in Jos, Nigeria. 2 cases of Giardia, 1 case of Malaria, 2 ear infections, Dara's 150 mosquito bites (all in one night), Janice bedridden 'til the end of her pregnancy, meeting African Christians, sharing the gospel, encouraging and being encouraged by other missionaries. All this has happened since we last wrote to you.

We spent the first 10 days in Nigeria getting over jet lag, doing 25 hours of rugged road trips, meeting our Nigerian leaders, and getting permission to remain in the country on a permanent basis.

THERE IS STRESS as we adjust to: new foods, new illnesses, bargaining while shopping, huge bugs, new relationships, a different English, riding crowded taxis. God has been with us during this time.

OUR PLANS NOW are to establish a home, get ready for the baby, make some contacts with language groups, work with Church of Christ in Nigeria (COCIN), our sponsor, about a language assignment. There are three they are currently thinking of: the Roba, Izere, and Gomai. Rev. Stephen Niyang and I will visit these groups. Janice, he, and I will prayerfully decide on which one to work with.
A Cameroonian pastor told us about a monkey who fell into a trap set by a hunter. The trap was simple: The monkey would grab onto the bait and ensnare himself. If he let go of the bait he would be free, but he doesn't. The pastor emphasized all he had to do was to let go, but his desire for the bait kept him ensnared and finally killed.

The parallel for us is easy. We can't hold onto the world and its passing pleasures; we need to let go, and trust in our Savior Jesus. It is only then we will be free from the lethal trap set by our adversary, the devil, and have eternal life and true freedom in Christ.
CALLED TO WORK WITH THE AFIZERE

After meeting with the leaders of the various language groups, the decision was made to work with the Afizere people based on the degree to which they had prepared for the Bible translation work to begin. In addition, the Gardners found that another Wycliffe couple, Peter and Nita Grainger, had begun the Izere language work a few years earlier by developing a writing system, assembling a language committee, and by gathering approximately 1600 Izere words into a beginning dictionary. It wasn’t long before the Gardner family accepted an invitation from the COCIN church and moved to the village of Fobur in Izereland to become familiar with the culture as they began to learn and document the language.

In 1992, Rev. Ishaku Afan joined the translation team as Rich’s colleague and counterpart. By May of that year, chapters 1-3 of the Gospel of Mark had been translated into Izere. Others involved with the translation work over the years included Izang, Bitrus, Victoria, Nuhu, Yohanna, Esther, Lydia, Musa, and Markus. In parallel with the translation work, a literacy project was launched to teach the Afizere people to read Izere.

The work progressed as planned for the first eight years and included the translation of various books of the New Testament and a few Bible stories, the recording of traditional tribal folk tales, and the development of literacy primers and curriculum for the schools.

The first ten booklets and charts in Izere were published by 1994 while translation of the New Testament proceeded in earnest.
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<td>1.</td>
<td>New Alphabet Chart – early 1992</td>
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<td>Kutes A Yesu (Birth of Jesus) -- Oct, 1993</td>
<td>500 copies</td>
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<td>Body Chart -- November, 1993</td>
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<td>Chart of the Human Face</td>
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<td>Kuyis Ikere Ni (Dictionary), 1993</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Primer I – January 1994</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>The Lord’s Prayer – February 1994</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Parables of Jesus – February 1994</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>How to Read Izere – March 1994</td>
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<td>1 &amp; 2 Thessalonians – March 1994</td>
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Throughout the course of the project there was clear evidence that God had his hand in the work and was blessing the efforts of the translators while at the same time preparing the people for the coming of his Word. But the spiritual and physical battles were raging as disease, death, violence and lawlessness continually plagued the Gardner family and their friends (and the computers they were using for the translation), as Satan did his best to disrupt the work.

As Janice wrote in 1995 after a furlough in Oregon, “It is easier to go back because we know what we are getting into, and harder to go back because we know what we are getting into…” Soon after returning to Nigeria she continued,

“A pastor’s wife in Fobur died. I was going out to the village and a car stopped beside us and told us that they were now carrying her body to Jos. I was so stunned at the calmness in which this other pastor presented her death. I told him how sorry I was. He said it was sad but it was her time. I asked if she was old. He
said no. But that it was the time that God chose for her.

It is true and people here seem to have a better acceptance of death than we do in the States. We always want to know why and always think that something could have been changed to prevent it. But God does have ultimate control. Life with Jesus is the real life we look forward to — not living in our earthly bodies longer than He intended.

I will never forget once when we were living in the village, a procession went by with a body ready for burial in Fobur. An old woman yelled from the roadside to her lifeless friend as she passed, “Soon I will be with you!”, as if she was speaking to someone leaving the market. It was a sweet remark of this old woman; she was joyful. She did look forward to the eternal life and to being with her friend again. It is something you see here more. People here suffer enough to long for heaven and a new body. They suffer enough to long for rest and call out in old age joyfully, “Soon I will be with you.”

In 1997, the Gardner’s fifth child, Sarina, was born in Jos while Rich, Ishaku and their team pressed on with the translation work.

In 1998 the aging Muslim “Paramount Chief” of the Afizere came to visit the home of “Izang Arin” – the Afizere’s name for Rich, the only white man who had ever learned to speak Izere. He approached Rich and Janice on that occasion and informed them that his grandson, Daniel, had become a Christian.
He asked that they take Daniel under their wing and assure that he attended seminary to become a pastor, which they did. It wasn't long before the old chief died. (Interestingly, at the time of the dedication of the New Testament in 2006, he had not yet been replaced.)

By year 2000 the translation of the gospel of Luke into Izere was completed. It was published, and a reading of the text was overdubbed on the "Luke Video," a verse-by-verse depiction of the life of Jesus as recorded by Luke. Rich asked a team of friends from Cedar Mill Bible Church (CMBC) in Portland, Oregon, USA, to bring audio and video equipment to Nigeria to help take the printed gospels of Luke, along with Luke Video, to the primary market villages in Izereland. Thousands heard the gospel for the first time in their heart language, and many accepted Christ, exclaiming, "aYesu fe Izere!" (Jesus speaks Izere).

The following year, Campus Crusade’s Jesus Film recording team came to Jos and the Izere version of the Jesus Film was completed. Dave Moser, Steve Bissell, and Janice’s father, Roy Schlesser, returned from CMBC and joined forces with Rich and the Afizere men along with Jesus Film Team members from other tribes to show the Film in 40 villages in ten days. Over 5,000 Afizere indicated decisions to follow Christ, and the two hour morning-after follow-up lesson was presented in each village. Rich had selected the villages with the strongest Christian influence to minimize trouble, but he was soon approached by Muslim chiefs who asked, "Is Jesus only for Christians?? We want to see the Jesus Film in our villages also." So, the Nigerian team quickly reassembled, and the Jesus Film was shown in another 25 Muslim and ATR (African Traditional Religion) villages.
What happened next was again unexpected - hundreds of people from dozens of villages began asking to be taught more about Jesus, about God, and about the Bible - in their own language. And, they wanted to begin gathering together to study and worship. It seemed the existing churches were often pastored by non-Izere speakers, and some by pastors with little depth in the Bible. In other cases, no village churches existed at all (especially true in the Muslim and ATR villages). So, the chief’s grandson, Daniel, moved to one of the remote villages and began planting churches. Rich began to work with the Great Commission Movement (GCM) in Jos to put on a two week training program for dozens of Afizere pastors and believers. These men and women had volunteered to move to the remote villages in order to use GCM’s "Beginning Your New Life In Christ" materials to begin teaching discipleship classes to the new believers.

During 2003-2004 the work continued to expand as the Jesus Film was shown in additional villages, and more Afizere "workers" (Bible study teachers) were trained. It was at this time that Peter and Nita Grainger returned to Izere-land for the first time since 1986. Nita reflects on that experience, picking up where she left off in this biography’s PREFACE…

One of the hardest parts of leaving Nigeria was the long wait—five years!—for someone to take over. But the prospect of meeting our successors, Rich and Janice Gardner, had persuaded me to return. We were delighted when they told us they had organized a visit to our old home, and a trip to a remote location to show the JESUS film in the Izere language.

The dilapidated state of our house and the village, and the news that my faithful, young house helper had died, saddened me.
Nevertheless, the warm welcome and affirmation from pastors and friends brought a sense of closure.

The next morning we set out for a village six hours’ drive away to show the JESUS film, stopping en route at many places where people had already seen it. We sensed its impact already when groups of new believers came to greet us. In some villages, half of those watching decided to follow Christ—700 in one village alone!

Night closed in as we arrived. Our audience was smaller than expected, due to a Muslim wedding taking place that night. Still, it was with a sense of joy and praise that we saw 70 respond to the invitation to follow Jesus. They were told about follow-up arrangements (starting at 6 a.m. the next morning) where they would be grounded in the basics of the faith. About 20 young and committed Christian men have volunteered to disciple them, cycling from village to village.

With the New Testament translation now well underway, God’s Word is becoming available. The people will not only see Jesus as a historical figure, but also walk with Him every day, as their seed of faith is watered and grows.

The church is growing and I can now look back with a deep sense of gratitude that we were able to play a small but foundational part in making it possible.

With a sense of awe, I have realized afresh the incredible truth that God chose to communicate the gospel through people, yet none of us is indispensable. We are now building God’s Church in Edinburgh. Others are providing God’s Word for a church in Nigeria.

God knows where to put each of us. (Grainger, 2003)

The work with the neighboring Icen people began after the Izere Project team received a request from the Icen reverends and pastors that they be helped by the Project team as well. Roy, Dave, and Steve continued working with the Gardners as "Advisors", each spending a month or more in Jos on numerous occasions along with others from their home church. By April, 2004, there were
over 6,000 believers attending weekly classes in villages stretching across Izereland and Icenland as Rich and Ishaku pushed on to finish the New Testament translation.

**THE IZERE NEW TESTAMENT**

By June, 2005, Dara and Brenton had both completed high school in Jos, and the Gardner family relocated to Portland, Oregon. Rev. Ishaku Afan joined Rich in Texas and they completed the translation of the New Testament along with the final preparations for printing. On Rich’s 50th birthday, in October, 2005, the first Izere New Testament was printed:
All of this work was in anticipation of the "main event" in 2006 - the publishing of the Izere New Testament and distribution of 15,000 copies to the Afizere people.

Many who initially saw the Jesus Film realized that they had heard "The Truth", but were not followed up in a way that builds a strong foundation in faith through understanding and access to scripture and Biblical teaching. The "Izere Project" team which Rich Gardner assembled addressed this problem by providing access to the Bible in the heart language of the people; Bible study materials; literacy programs that teach people to read and write in their heart language or provides them access to fluent "public readers" in each village; theology reference books for students at the local pastors schools; instruction for pastors on how to work with new believers; and training for lay workers in leading Bible studies and discipleship classes in the churches. With the scripture available in the heart language, God is able to "speak for Himself" to the Izere-speaking people.

The Izere Project was not planned out in advance by Rich and Janice or their coworkers. In fact, at each step of the way the Holy Spirit seems to have brought people together from a variety of organizations and people groups, and has led the team in surprising ways down paths which eventually converged and came together at just the right time.

Now based in Portland, Oregon, Rich and Janice have expanded their work in Nigeria by joining The Seed Company as consultants, working with indigenous translation teams from a dozen other people groups in Central
Nigeria. Meanwhile, Dara and Brenton are in college, and Joelle, Lydia and Sarina are attending Portland schools and adjusting to being “Americans.”

In 2006, the Director of Training and Consulting for The Seed Company (TSC) wrote,

As you may be aware, Rich Gardner has been very much involved over the last two or three years in using the JESUS Film in the Izere language in Nigeria, and especially in developing ways to help churches plan effective “follow-up” programs. Rich has already written up a significant proposal for this type of Scripture Use ministry which has been processed at the International level with the JESUS Film project.

Quite a high proportion of TSC-related projects include the production of the JESUS Film in their goals, along with Scripture in the language. We are concerned to help these projects build effective bridges so that those who have made commitments to Christ through seeing the film are discipled and are guided/helped toward using the Scriptures in that language. His role will involve advising language teams on developing strategies to foster acceptance and effective use of the translated Scriptures. We envisage that his ministry will initially be primarily in Nigeria where there is currently strong partnership with the JESUS Film project in more than 15 languages. Later this ministry is likely to be extended to other countries in Africa or elsewhere.
CONCLUSION

Jesus used the Parable of the Sower to teach his followers about the Kingdom of God and the sowing of his Word, using an illustration which would be familiar to the people of an agrarian culture, such as the Afizere. With this in mind, the Gardners can be thought of as farmers who sweated and toiled to till the land by hand, who sowed the seeds, battled the storms and drought and pestilence, wrestled with the weeds and insects and wild animals which tried to devour the young shoots, and then carried the baskets of produce for miles on their heads to get to the market. Those who joined them as Izere Project workers and advisors have had the great privilege of helping to set up the produce stands in the markets and sell the goods, assisting the hungry people as they come to gather “the bread of life” and take it home - first to their own families, and later to share with “every tribe and every nation.”

Joelle, Dara, Lydia, Brenton, Janice, Sarina, & Rich Gardner, 2006
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