

An Ambassador for Christ

Brady Anderson, Chairman of the Board, Wycliffe Bible Translators

In his well-traveled career in public service, Brady Anderson has worked with Presidents, senators, heads of state, generals and countless other people in positions of earthly power. But after meeting Christ as His Savior in his native Arkansas while serving a then-obscure governor named Bill Clinton, Brady embraced the needs of the poorest and neediest in the world, especially those without written Scripture in their native languages. That eventually led him and his family to become full-time missionaries with Wycliffe Bible Translators.

The Andersons left full-time service with Wycliffe in 1994 when then-President Clinton appointed Brady to be the U.S. ambassador to Tanzania. Today the Vietnam veteran is an investor and international consultant who not only chairs the Wycliffe board of directors, but also serves on the board of World Vision, the Christian child-development agency. With his diverse background—encompassing the church, the military, the government and the private sector—Brady offers unique insight into world affairs.

RQ managing editor Paul Schwarz interviewed Brady about his long associations with both the powerful and the powerless.

How did your conversion to Christ come about?

Before working in Governor Clinton's office in Arkansas, I had been a lawyer in the state attorney general's office. I enjoyed public service and saw my future in political terms. But the Lord enabled me to realize that while those things have significance, if you're not grounded in the true faith, you tend to wander. I was wandering, unsure of where I was headed. My marriage came to a crisis. My wife, Betty, came to faith first, and through her gentle acceptance of me in my imperfect state, and her sharing the love of Christ through the way she lived her life was attractive to me.

One day, reading John's Gospel, I became attracted to the person of Jesus I saw there. I saw incredible strength and power, which I had been attracted to in the secular world. Yet Jesus had all those things but at the same time a whole lot more. He was gentle, caring and loving. I said, "God, if You're listening, and if all this is true, then I ask You to accept me and show me that it is." He did right then, and that was the beginning of my new life, new marriage and new career.

You've been around many powerful people in your life. How does one keep earthly power in perspective?

Almost without exception, people who rise to leadership positions in their societies have had to compromise in order to achieve that level, which can be either good or bad. Often they've had to give up too much in terms of who they really are, whether they're believers or not. However, some do maintain "first principles" to a great degree—the primacy of their faith, their commitment to their wife and children—but that's awfully hard because they're pulled in so many different ways.

If you embark on that sort of career, and you're not aware of your true identity in God's design, you're going to have a lot of problems. For one thing, any mistakes public figures make are thrown back in their faces by people they don't even know. Also, power can be intoxicating and can take over a person. People constantly either ask you for things or tell you how wonderful

you are. That can be difficult to overcome. And with people who achieve high office, there's a tendency to step on people to get there, justifying it by saying, "I have to do this in order to do good things." Even for the Lord, one can try to justify being disingenuous or ignoring others' needs.

That's why in Scripture we're called to pray for our leaders. They are important for the running of societies. They make decisions that affect many people for long periods of time. People at that level can be quite lonely, even though there are always people around them. They need wisdom, and will they surround themselves with people who will tell them the truth? You tend to tell people like that what they want to hear so they'll be pleased with you, but in the long run that doesn't always serve them or the people well.

Having been a U.S. ambassador to another country, what parallels do you draw between that and being Christ's ambassador?

Both of them are full-time jobs. Being an ambassador for Christ is always with me; I never turn that off, no matter what I'm doing or where I am. That's also true in representing your country overseas. When you represent the U.S., you do so in whatever you do when you're in that country. People are always observing you, judging you because you embody all the values your country stands for. As Christians, as ambassadors for Christ, we embody the values He stands for. Also there's the idea of being in another place that's not your home. As a secular ambassador from the U.S., I was in a country that wasn't my own. I lived there, but I represented another place. As Christians, of course, we're living in the world, but our true citizenship is in the kingdom of God.

How did God call you to Wycliffe?

After my conversion, my wife and I began thinking about how God had given us certain talents and experiences, how we had one life to live, and what we should be doing. One day someone from church asked me if I'd ever heard of Wycliffe, and I hadn't, so he told us about how they translate Scripture into minority language groups that are often small numerically and at the edges of society. He specifically pointed out that the first translations were for indigenous Central Americans who did not speak Spanish and were abused and marginalized in Latin society. That's true all over the world: Small minority groups speak a minority language, and are ostracized and discriminated against—the powerless of the world, as it were.

Betty and I were attracted to dealing with the kinds of people our Lord Himself was used to dealing with. The more we found out about the work, the more attractive it was. We were also sold on the fact that when you finish a translation, the people have the written Word in their language. No matter what happens, if those people have the written Word, they can keep it somewhere and memorize it. Also, the written Word is a bulwark against error. If people don't have the written Word in a language they can understand very well, they are subject to doctrinal misinterpretations, which can get out of hand.

What was the extent of your work with Wycliffe in Africa?

We served as full-time Wycliffe members in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia. In Tanzania, Betty and I were the first from Wycliffe to live and work there, so our job was to get the work started. Tanzania had previously been hostile to the development of minority languages, of which there are 120 or so, and therefore didn't allow any Scripture translation. However, when we moved there we were told things were changing, which in fact they were, and that we would

be allowed to proceed. We did language and sociological research—determining how many languages there were and how different they were, so as to identify the languages of the future for certain people groups, as opposed to those that were dying because the older people still spoke them but the young ones didn't.

Once we knew we needed translators and other researchers, we couldn't get visas for them due to religious opposition, so the work stopped (though today Wycliffe is engaged in Bible translations in 15 or so Tanzanian languages). At that point we went to Ethiopia for a year. Ethiopia had been under a Marxist regime that had just fallen, so they needed managers and administrators to help restart the work there.

How did God call you to the U.S. ambassadorship?

We were in Ethiopia when Clinton was first elected President. He asked me to come back to the States to give a prayer at a luncheon the day before the actual inaugural. While there, I talked with him and others about our work with Wycliffe and how there seemed to be a lull in it at the time. So he nominated me to the Senate to be the ambassador to Tanzania. It wasn't really hard for me to do that; I always feel like we are ambassadors for Christ wherever we are in the world, and we're supposed to be in the world and not of the world. So I accepted the appointment.

You're on the boards of both Wycliffe and World Vision, which in their own ways focus on development in the neediest areas of the world. How did this ministry focus develop?

From Scripture reading, prayer, Bible-study groups, church attendance and all those things Christians do, it seemed to us that God is always calling His people to be aware of the suffering around them. People suffer both spiritually and physically, and we are called to address those needs however we can. Wycliffe works with needy peoples, and World Vision also works with suffering people, with the focus on poor children and their families.

Not everybody is called full time to work with the poor, or children, or AIDS patients, or refugees who have been raped or abused, but we are all called to do something, and to do it in the name of Christ. Wycliffe deals with the literacy side; 60 percent of the world is what we call "pre-literate." Teaching people to read and write, especially in their own language, is a fundamental tool in development. With World Vision, the focus is to give somebody a cup of water or teach somebody how to fish—whatever the development issue is—in the name of Christ. I always want the freedom to be able to express my faith to someone I'm helping, to be able to say, "The reason I'm doing this for you is because God loves me, and He loves you."

We in the American church can be insulated from the needs of people around the world. Hearing news reports about the drought in Niger or the tsunami in Asia, Americans are generous and want to give—they want to do something to help. Staying long term with that kind of service is difficult, though, and not everybody can, but Betty and I are called to stick with it.

Development requires long-term commitment of resources, whether money or people. We're finding that out in Iraq—the process of changing a society so that, for example, people are tolerated for their differences, and both girls and boys get educated, will take a long time for people to come around to. Setting up an education system so that people to participate in a global economy cannot be done overnight. It takes years to help people get there. Africa has farther to go than anybody. There have been and always will be failures in development efforts, but we're called to keep looking for ways to do things better.

You've worked in church-based groups, government and the private sector to help address development issues. What is the church's role in the process?

Churches and faith-based groups have a huge role to play. In fact, faith-based groups have always been involved in international development, spending U.S. and European government money. It's always been the World Visions or the Catholic Relief Services and others who over the past 30 to 40 years have received food aid—U.S. excess farm commodities—and handed it out to the world.

In many places, especially in Africa where there are lots of churches on the ground, Christian groups have a special relationship. We talk the same talk, and have respect and love for each other, so we can get a lot more done. For example, HIV/AIDS is a terrible epidemic in Africa. Churches and Christian groups were slow to get involved, but once they realized the problem, they have helped people see the faith component to change—at its root, HIV/AIDS is a spiritual problem, Governments don't get involved in that, obviously, but people of faith can and should.

Any time a faith community is involved with government in doing something, there are always dangers—not for the government but for the faith community. You can tend to get too reliant on the government, thinking it has all the answers when it doesn't. Governments exist to protect the people of their own countries, and to enhance their prosperity; they and the church have different roles in the world. So when they're working together, when faith-based groups use government money, there are all kinds of red flags—you have to be very careful.

Last year, though, World Vision was the largest handler of food in the world, and almost all the food was donated by the U.S. government. And that food was used by a whole lot of hungry people. If there's a major catastrophe in the world, the church should be there. Governments will be there in a big way as well; we going to be rubbing shoulders, and sometimes that may be difficult. But we have to be ready and willing to do that, while maintaining our core principles.

With Bible translation, Wycliffe doesn't bump up against the U.S. government as much as an agency like World Vision does. Any time you work in a foreign country, though, you're going to run into government, and sometimes they may be awful to you or want to use you in some way you're not called to. It's an interesting mix when faith-based organizations and governments run up against each other, and it's fraught with danger.

You have a long-standing relationship with former President Clinton. How did that develop?

We first met in 1967, when he was a senior at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. I had just graduated from college and gone to work in the office of then-Senator J. William Fulbright from Arkansas. Fulbright chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee during the war in Vietnam, so my interest in international affairs really took off then. Clinton was working part time in Fulbright's office, so I got to know him there. When he returned to Arkansas and taught at the law school, I helped him run for state attorney general, then worked in his attorney general's office. Years later, when Betty and I went to work for Wycliffe and he had become governor, Betty and I sent him our prayer letters, and on the bottom of them he would write letters about as long as ours and send them back. He was always fascinated by and supportive of what we were doing. When back in Little Rock on furlough, I would visit him. That was how it developed.

To what extent have people misunderstood your relationship with him?

With any public figures, whether Clinton or whoever, people who don't know them well—which is almost everyone—only get general impressions, especially political people. Some of it's right and some not. For those of us who happen to know one of those people well, it's simply going to put you in an odd position. Here in Austin, Texas, where I live now, I know people who know President Bush quite well, and people always ask them, “Is he really this or that way?” or “Why do people like Laura Bush so much and not him?” and so on.

With Clinton, that's true in spades, probably because of the time in which he was President, and because he was the first from his generation to be President, and because of all the problems he had. So it's very understandable for Christians to say, “Wait a minute—who is this person? He goes to church and carries a Bible, but is he really a Christian?” and all that. People normally don't ask, “How could you work for someone like that?” though it has been said a time or two.

Of course, when I first went to the embassy in Tanzania, many people knew I'd been there before as a missionary. People in the State Department, as well as the diplomats, were quite concerned about what I was going to be like: Would I be an extreme religious fanatic? It just takes time and effort to get beyond that, where people begin to see you for who you really are. People who get to know me just have to take me for who I am.

For more information about Wycliffe Bible Translators and World Vision, visit www.wycliffe.org and www.worldvision.org respectively.